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# IMAGINATION

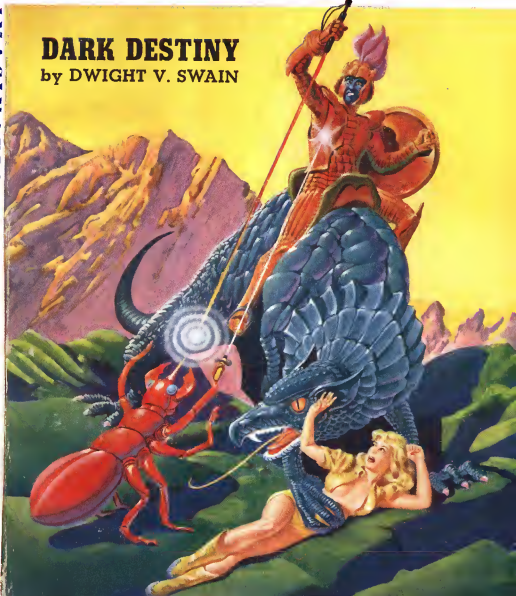
MARCH 1952

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STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

## DARK DESTINY

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN



IMAGINATION

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

VOL. 3 NO. 2  
ISSUE NO. 6

# Introducing the

# AUTHOR



*Mari Wolf*

*Editor, Pandora's Box*



I lived a perfectly normal life until I was six weeks old. Then we left California and my parents took me home—to Portovelo, Ecuador. We went down to Guayaquil on a fruit boat that wasn't exactly equipped for handling babies. Laundry was the worst problem, but the crewmen solved it. They flew my diapers from the Captain's bridge.

Portovelo is rather inaccessible. We arrived there by means of the fruit boat, a riverboat, a flatcar on a single-gauge freight railroad, and a string of mules. I didn't get to ride a mule, though. Two of the native boys carried me to camp in a sort of sedan chair-crib.

Three years later we reversed the mule-railroad-riverboat-freighter process and came back to the States,

finally settling in Laguna Beach, California.

By the time I was five I'd decided I wanted to be a writer. Since my favorite stories then were the Greek and Roman myths that my parents used to read to me, my own first attempt at fiction followed the classical tradition. It was all about the thrilling adventures of Atlas the Earth Holder and Sinus the Moon Holder and how Sinus fell out of Heaven when he dropped the Moon.

I guess it's only natural that I took to science fiction.

In school I spent most of my time drawing cartoons and writing plays which groups of us used to perform enthusiastically for anyone who would look at them. It was about

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Front cover painting by Malcolm Smith, illustrating a scene from DARK DESTINY.  
Interiors by Malcolm Smith, H. W. McCauley, and Joe W. Tillotson.

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# The Editorial

IT'S always a big event when a new writer is discovered. An editor wades through stacks of manuscripts every month separating the wheat from the chaff—the possibles from the impossibles. Sometimes he reads a story from an unknown author, knows the yarn is not acceptable, and yet recognizes that the writer has something — that given a little coaching and encouragement a latent talent will emerge in a good story.

THIS has been true of many of your top favorites in recent years. You see them in IMAGINATION, names like Geoff St. Reynard, Margaret St. Clair, Chester S. Geier, Charles F. Myers—and one top-notch in particular who we coaxed out of retirement (he was busy writing educational film scripts), Dwight V. Swain. There are many more, but these names head the list for ability and popularity. You know for example, that you can depend upon a Geoff St. Reynard or Dwight V. Swain cover story to give you plenty of action and suspense along with an intriguing plot and good characterization. And you don't have to be told that the mere mention of a "Toffee" story by Charles F. Myers is a sure-fire guarantee for some smooth and hilarious reading as you follow the further adventures of Marc Pillsworth, with the inimitable Toffee, and Marc's earth-bound haunt, George. (A new "Toffee" novel will be featured in our July issue!)

IN the past six months we've discovered a number of other new writers. Among them are names you won't recognize now—but you will very soon. Names like Alan E. Nourse, Zenna Henderson, Charles E. Fritch, J. T. Oliver, and one in particular whom we know is going to become a top favorite, Daniel F. Galouye.

WE'D like to tell you a little bit about Dan Galouye because you are going to see a lot of him in the future. It all started some ten months ago. We picked up a long novelette that had been submitted to Madge by an unknown, and read it. The story wasn't good enough for publication because the author hadn't given enough attention to his characters and plot. But the writing was terrific and the idea behind the story was equally good.

WE rejected the story with a long letter of criticism, pointing out what was wrong and suggesting possible lines of revision. The unknown author wrote us thanking us for our interest and said he'd get right to work. He did. About a month later we received the story again. We read it. The writing was just as good—even better, and the plot had been improved. But it was still not what it could have been—*should* have been. We carefully edited the manuscript this time and returned it with another long letter. After another month we received a short novel from this

unknown that made us sit back and whistle. This was it. The writer had come through. He had written one of the most powerful stories we had ever had the pleasure of reading. Daniel F. Galouye received our check a few days later—and we were already making plans to give TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL! the feature spot in a future issue.

**T**HE earliest issue in which we could schedule the novel was May 1952. We did — so this is the big announcement for you to haunt your newsstand for our next issue. You're going to read a science fiction story that is new—different and, we predict, one that will establish Dan Galouye as one of your top favorites.

**I**N the meantime we bought several more stories by Galouye. We're presenting one of them this issue, REBIRTH. While REBIRTH is an entirely different type of story from next issue's great novel, it is an indication of the excellent brand of science fiction writing of which Dan Galouye is capable. This is Dan's sendoff in IMAGINATION, and we know it's a mighty good one. Be sure and drop us a line telling us how you like the story—and don't forget to reserve your May issue of Madge now for his great novel, TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!

**A**ND just one more thing about the next issue. Our cover is going to be another great Malcolm Smith photo-dyced masterpiece. We won't give you any further hint about it except to say that you'll be bowled over. Incidentally, how do you like the variety we're including in our covers? Each issue has a different theme — symbolic, inter-

planetary, action, artistic—but all eye-catching. We think variety is a good thing and can promise you many more innovations in the future. (Along those lines talented artist Bill Terry is doing a new cover that will knock your eye out.) . . . More about that later.—Also, H. W. McCauley is finishing two terrific covers right now. Believe us, our artists are working hard to give you the best covers in the field—and they do!

**A** WORD about science fiction movies. This month we present another FANTASY FILM FLASH feature by our Hollywood movie editor, Forrest J. Ackerman. This will bring you up to date on what's going on in the film capitol, and as you will read, the activity is definitely a science fiction trend. Hollywood has been staggered with the successes of "The Thing", "The Day The Earth Stood Still", and "Destination Moon." The very recent "When Worlds Collide" is also proving to be big box-office. We saw that film recently, and while we personally thought it couldn't come up to "The Thing" or "The Day The Earth Stood Still", it was nevertheless an excellent picture. We thought the only letdown with the Balmer-Wylie movie was the fact that not enough money was spent to make the end-of-the-earth sequences the spectacle they should have been. The story was good, however, and the audience loved it. Science fiction is no longer around the corner for the general public—it's here!

**W**HICH about winds up shop for this issue. Don't forget to reserve your copy of the May number —on sale the first week in March—for the great Galouye novel. In, the in the meantime drop us a line . . . wth

# DARK DESTINY

by  
DWIGHT  
V.  
SWAIN



The Blue Warrior had journeyed far across the void in his search for power; but he found death along with it—in the eyes of a goddess!



**N**AKED, still as death, the veiled woman-goddess men called Xaymar rested on a gold-draped dais within the great, glowing, crystal globe. Xaymar, queen of storms. Ruler

*of rain and wind and lightning, empress of all the surging forces that spread their tumult across the sky. Sainted monster, evil savior. Old as time, and young as jolly. Born of woman, damned of men, wise with dark wisdom gone astray.*

*Xaymar, passionate goddess. A word, a myth, a fading picture in forgotten books. A phantasm rising out of these ghostly, gutted cities, these ruins dead a thousand years.*

*Yet here she lay in this deep-sunk vault, nude save for the short, jeweled veil that masked the top half of her face. Her body still gleamed like a supple ivory statue, a vision of sleek, ripe-curved perfection. Rippling waves of jet-black hair framed the pale, veiled oval of her face in a darkly radiant nimbus. A faint rose glow touched lips and breasts. It seemed almost as if she could have been sleeping here mere hours only, instead of eons; as if she were still alive and vibrant . . . all woman; all terrible, voluptuous promise . . .*

\* \* \*

The *Shamon* priest was bent with age, his face a deep-seamed net of wrinkles. The short cloak of his order, vivid with a hundred contrasting shades of blue, covered his thin shoulders, and a *toloid* tablet emblazoned with a stylized representation of a lightning bolt, Xaymar's emblem, hung suspended over his bony chest.

He said: "I want you to kill a woman."

Across the table, the blue warrior called Haral sat very still. He did not speak.

The old *Shamon* hurried on: "They say the same, all those to whom I've spoken—that you alone, of all the warriors here on Ulna, would dare to go against the raider Sark. The rest are brave until they hear his name; then, quickly, they sing another song. But you—" He hesitated, fumbling, and peered uncertainly at Haral out of rheumy, fading eyes. "Tell me, blue one, is it true that you went alone to Eros and slew the tyrant lord Querroom because he'd dared to put a price upon your head? And that then you defied the Federation to try to hang you, and slashed your way through the whole Federation fleet with your single ship?"

"It's true."

"You see—?" the oldster cried in quavering triumph. "You see it, *Sha* Haral? You are a warrior worthy of the name! In you there's iron instead of meal. That is why I come to you to kill this woman—"

"A woman—?" Haral repeated dully. He swirled the fiery *kabat* in his glass. "Why should I kill a woman?"

"Because I'll pay you well," the *Shamon* priest croaked eagerly. Coins clinked onto the table. "Here, look! Two hundred *samori*, *Sha* Haral! So much for such a simple task—enough to send you out again from Ulna, to put you once more on the road to wealth and power,



ambition . . ."

**B**ROODINGLY, Haral stared down into the *kabat's* green, too-potent depths. Of a sudden he was acutely conscious of the smoke and stench and jarring sound that eddied through the shadows of this filthy, frowsy deadfall that passed as a cafe. *'Wealth and power, ambition?'* He laughed aloud, knowing as he did it that his tongue had grown too thick with *kabat*. This was the road down which ambition led—the road to stinking drinking dives, and dreary nights and drearier days on an outlaw world called Ulna. The road to blood and valor, a warrior's name—and proposals of woman-murder.

Ambition? Two hundred *samori*-worth of ambition! Bitterly, he laughed again, deep in his throat. There were other, better things to call it: greed; thirst for blood; a cursed, insatiate lust for power.

The old priest gripped his arm. "Three hundred, then! Three hundred *samori*, *Sha Haral!*"

Somberly, the blue man stared off into the crowd and smoke and shadows. It dawned on him that already new faces had sifted in: new forms, all arrogance and swagger.

The forms and faces of *Gar Sark's* raiders.

"Three hundred *samori*? Three hundred—to challenge *Gar Sark* and all his crew, as well as murder?" He smiled a thin, bleak, mirthless smile and shook his head. "No, old

man. What you want is a madman, not a warrior."

"Four hundred—four hundred *samori* for a single blow!" In his eagerness the priest was slavering. "No? Five, then, *Sha Haral!* Five hundred, all for you. I have no more."

For the first time, Haral looked full at the *Shamon*. "Why do you want her dead?" he challenged. He brought his fist down with a heavy thud upon the table. "Why? That's what I want to know! Who is she? What has she done that calls for killing?"

"Why—?" Sweat came to the ancient's face. Uneasily, he shifted. "She—she—*Sark* is a monster, and his men have seized her for tomorrow's games in the arena. She'll die in agony at their hands. I—I cannot bring myself to let her suffer—"

"So you'd hire me to kill her instead?" Haral laughed harshly. "I hear your words, old man—"

"My name is *Namboina.*"

"—*Namboina*, I hear your words. But I'll rot on your *vidal* planetoid before I believe them. Too many other *Shamon* have died on Ulna for you to worry about one more." He drained his glass and slammed it down. "No. Find someone else to do your killing. I like to know the facts before I murder."

**T**HE sweat stood out on the priest's forehead in great beads now. With shaking fingers, he wiped it away. "I—I see I must tell you

all, *Sha Haral*. The—the woman is Kyla, a virgin priestess to our goddess Xaymar. Her life, her body, are consecrated to the goddess. She is not for mortal men. But Sark and his raiders care nothing for our Xaymar. In their blood-lust and madness they would defile even her priestess, Kyla. But it cannot be! Better that Kyla die—” He broke off, stared at Haral. “I, Namboina, am high priest to Xaymar. It is my duty to save Kyla from shame, our goddess from defilement—”

Haral said: “You lie in your teeth, Namboina! I’ve heard enough of your thrice-plagued Xaymar to know that she’s called the passionate goddess—and her priestesses pattern themselves upon her! If there’s a virgin still among them, it’s news to the raider fleets that comb these warrens in search of women.”

“No, no—! Not Kyla!” The *Shamon’s* loose mouth worked. His face was a mask of desperation. “She is a votary, consecrated. She is not as the others—”

Haral shoved back his chair; surged to his feet. “I’ve had enough of your lies, old man!” he slashed. “Sing someone else your song of murder!”

Namboina’s quavering voice rose, thin with fury: “A curse on you, alien! A curse on all your outland breed that have made a cesspool out of Ulna—”

But now a new voice cut him short, thundering through the shadows: “This is the one we want! The

old one, the priest they call Namboina!”

Haral spun about.

A dozen fighting men from Sark’s raider crews were coming towards him and Namboina. Spread in a menacing arc, weapons out and ready, they closed in like cold-eyed, deadly shadows.

Haral fell back a step, till he stood with his back against the wall. Big-eyed with fear, Namboina slumped in his seat, as if trying to hide behind the table.

It came to Haral that a hush had fallen over the *kabat* dive. The raucous voices had faded into silence. The rattle of glasses was suddenly stilled.

Then a glowering Martian who seemed to be in charge of the raider gang snapped orders: “Yes. This is the one. Bring him along!”

A Thorian’s tentacle lashed out to grip Namboina and drag him bodily from his chair.

Now a *Pervod* jerked his scaly head towards Haral. “What of this one here? They were together.”

The Martian pivoted for a brief, disdainful glance at the blue man. “That *kabat*-soaked scum?” And then: “But bring him, too. We’ll take no chances.”

Almost as if in intentional added insult, he turned away and sheathed his ray-gun.

A hot, tempestuous tide of anger swirled up within the warrior. But he did not move; he did not

speak.

A second Martian caught his arm. "Come along, you *zanat*, before we stave in your ugly head!"

For an instant, in spite of himself, Haral's arm went rigid. Then, thin-lipped, he sucked in air, and fell in beside the quaking, shaking priest.

One of the raiders laughed contemptuously and shoved the pair of them ahead still faster.

They reached the narrow doorway that led out to the street. Then, while their prisoners paused, two of the raiders stepped outside.

A knot of tension drew tight in the pit of Haral's stomach. He let his shoulders slump, and slouched, half-turning.

Namboina stumbled on through the door.

A *Pervod* pushed the blue man forward.

With studied care, Haral, too, stumbled. He caught the handle of the open door as if to keep himself from falling.

Then, like lightning, he was turning, kicking. The *Pervod* crashed backward with a howl of anguish.

Haral leaped through the doorway, out into the street, slamming the heavy portal shut behind him. He caught a glimpse of the two crewmen there—startled, whirling.

But Namboina was between Haral and the raiders. Savagely, the blue man threw himself against the priest and sent him crashing into the nearest crewman.

The second of the raiders was a one-eyed, barrel-chested *Malya*. He leaped back, cat-fast, whipping up his ray-gun.

But Haral dived in beneath its shaft. His shoulder drove deep into the *Malya's* midriff, hammering the dark raider down. Clutching for the ray-gun, he tore it out of the other's hand.

In the same instant, he heard Namboina cry out in panic.

By instinct, pure and simple, he dropped flat on his belly. By instinct, too, he fired the ray-gun—straight into the face of the second raider, free now and charging down upon him.

The raider dropped dead in his tracks.

Haral pivoted, just as the door to the *kabat-dive* jerked open. Again he triggered the weapon.

The charge caught the Martian in charge of the party square in the belly. The others, behind him, sprang back inside, out of the way.

THE narrow street echoed with Haral's wild, reckless laughter. Lurching to his feet, he stood there swaying for a moment, looking this way and that for old Namboina.

But the *Shamon* had disappeared as if by magic, and from within the *kabit-dive* came sounds that spoke of preparations for another sally.

Whirling, Haral raced full-tilt for the nearest alley.

When he stopped again, he was half a mile and a hundred worlds

away, lost in the tangled maze of passageways that wound through the crumbling heart of the native town. His legs were shaking, his lungs afire, and the *kabat*-sickness swirled through him in agonizing, nauseous waves. Choking and retching, he slumped, exhausted in a murky entryway.

Then that, too, passed, and he lay silent and unmoving in the darkness. But now another sickness was upon him, the sickness that led him to seek surcease in *kabat*; the sickness that came with the thoughts he could not push out of his brain.

Where would it end, this madness that ever drove him on? What prize lay in power, that he must waste his life away searching, groping, striving for it? Why could he not live and love and die like other men, unplagued by the fierce surge of insane ambition that still pursued him—even here, even now?

*Even here, even now.* That was the acid that gnawed his vitals. What had it brought him, all his striving? He'd carved a crimson course across half a solar system, till that very system itself disowned him. He'd drenched the warrior worlds in blood to no avail.

And the road ended here.

Was this, then, his destiny—to hide here, rotting, beyond the reach of the Federation, till at last the *kabat* took its toll? Must he sink lower and then still lower into the slime of this ugly outlaw world of Ulna, harassed at will by such scum

as Sark?

But at least, there'd be no woman-murder. Not yet; not for a while. Even five hundred *samori* could not drag him down that far.

A new spasm of fury shook him, and he cursed Namboina aloud with the vilest epithets a dozen tongues could offer.

But the inner sickness still lingered with him. Bitterly, he stumbled to his feet, wondering in the same instant what had led the *Shamon* priest to lie—why he had really sought to have the woman called Kyla killed.

It was then he felt the weight in his side pocket.

Dully, he fumbled to find what it might be; then, puzzled, pulled it out into the open.

But it was only a bag . . . a worn, somehow familiar bag.

A bag heavy with five hundred glittering *samori* . . .

## CHAPTER II

HE rode out at high noon astride the great, blue-scaled Mercurian *hwalon* dragon that in itself struck terror into lesser men. The wars of the void had burned his own skin blue with searing krypton radiation, and long years of battle service had dulled the polish of the heavy copronium armor that he wore.

Few knew his name, nor whence he came. He'd buried himself too deep for that. But then, they did

not need to know, for those were unimportant things in this brutal, brawling world of Ulna, where death walked so close on every hand.

It was a world of dangerous men, this Ulna; an outlaw world, tumultuous haven for the hunter and the hunted. The scum of the spaceways had gathered here, dregs of the void—rabble quick to anger, quick to kill. *Pervods* of Venus brushed shoulders with Earthmen. *Chonyas* and *Malyas* stalked among strange mutants, weird life-forms drawn from a dozen far-flung planets.

Yet none came forth to challenge Haral. For those who eyed and measured him gave special attention to the slender, deadly, light-lance that was his weapon. Then, wordless, almost too quickly, they turned away.

So now he rode the filth-choked streets of this slattern town that served as Ulna's spaceport. And as he rode, beneath the blazing yellow sky, he smiled his thin, bleak, mirthless smile, and wondered how the motley mob that thronged these warrens would look if they realized his real mission.

Then, at last, he came to the plaza and *Gar Sark*.

Sark, the renegade; Sark, the raider. Sark, who had looted *Band-jaran*. Sark, the butcher, with the blood of all *Horla* on his hands. Sark. A sinister figure, at best. At worst, a monster to strike terror across the void.

Ulna was his today, for no crea-

ture dared to stand against him. His ships had blazoned the purple night with streaks of scarlet flame as they ramped; and his crews too had turned the town scarlet with their violence, till even the other lawless ones gathered here were cowed to sullen silence.

This morning, the raiders had seized this ragged, unkempt tract that passed as a central park—that they might enjoy their own savage brand of sport, the rumor went.

'Sport?' Haral smiled his mirthless smile again. It was a good excuse, and Sark's own crews might even believe it. But for Sark himself, unless the day had come when tigers changed their stripes, grim business was mixed in with the pleasure. That was Sark's way; he made no move that did not offer possibilities of profit.

But how? The blue man frowned; then shrugged and urged the *hwalon* on. It was enough that Sark was here; that the *Shamon* priest, *Namboina*, had made his murderous proposal. Something was in the wind. He'd have to bide his time and trust to luck for further details.

A shout went up, even as Haral reached the outskirts of the milling crowd that had gathered in the plaza—a shout and, through it, the scream of a soul gone mad with pain.

The blue man pressed the *hwalon* forward, trusting to the difference the armor made in his appearance

to protect him from recognition by the members of last night's searching party.

The crowd of town rabble and raider crewmen gave way before him, parting under the menace of the *hwalon's* claws and collar and horrid, hook-beaked head.

Sark's crews had set up an arena of sorts, with seats for their chiefs along one side. In front of the seats a crude ring was fenced in with posts and thin, resilient duraloid cable.

Within the ring, they had an *Ulno*—one of the grotesque, two-headed primitives that were this planetoid's dull-witted subject people.

And there, too, stood one of the scarlet coleoptera, the giant thinking beetles that were *Ulna's* plague.

Now, as Haral reached the front of the crowd, the coleopteron stalked forward, towards the *Ulno*. Hideous and deadly, it stood nearly three feet tall at the thorax. Its protuberant multi-faceted eyes glittered evilly. Mandibles clacking, the misshapen head moved from side to side in short, menacing arcs.

The crowd roared its blood-lust, its tension.

Revulsion touched Haral. But he gave the sadistic show no heed beyond it. Bleakly, he looked across the ring, to Sark himself.

Sark: a smirking, bulbous, obscene thing; half humanoid, half reptilian. *Gar* of the space-raiders, king of killers. He sat in his famed Uranian riding-chair like some mad, monstrous potentate upon a throne.

Eyes murder-bright beneath their reptilian lids, gross rolls of fat a-quiver, he leaned far forward, watching the bloody battle unfold before him.

Here, looking at the raider chief for the first time, a wave of incredulous loathing, disillusion, rose up within Haral. Was this gross slug the best the warrior worlds could offer? Could a creature as soft and slack as this wield the power that had shaken half the void?

The bitter ashes of his own thwarted drive for empire ate at the blue man. The world swam with a crimson haze of hate and fury.

Then that mood passed, and Haral noticed other things.

For the raider's fat-rimmed eyes were never still, and the lights that gleamed deep in them told of craft and savage cunning. There was a brain behind those eyes—a brain so lightning-fast and wary that against it mere physical strength alone meant nothing. That was how he ruled this pack; that was why none lived to challenge.

And now, as he watched, Haral observed another thing: though the webbed fingers of Sark's left hand splayed out along one tree-like leg, kneading and clenching as if he were at one with the coleopteron, thirsting for the *Ulno's* very life, his right hand never moved from a switch set in the chair-arm.

**N**ARROW-eyed, the blue man shifted for a better view. As

best he could see, a cable led from the switch down to what appeared to be a bulky, black, cymosynthesizer box slung beneath the seat.

Frowning, Haral pondered. Almost unconsciously, he caressed his light-lance.

Then a new shout from the crowd drew his attention back to the arena.

In the ring, the wild-eyed, shaking Ulno was retreating before the giant beetle. One of his four hands already was shredded beyond all recognition. Blood gushed from a wound in another arm, slashed open to the bone. His two heads turned jerkily this way and that, desperately seeking some avenue of escape, some sign of mercy.

But no sign came. No path appeared.

The beetle poised. The point of its dagger-like antenna dropped a fraction lower.

With a shrill cry, the Ulno darted along the interlinked cables that bounded the arena in a last frantic effort to escape.

The coleopteron lunged. Beetle and primitive crashed together in wild, paroxysmic conflict.

Then, suddenly, the Ulno was reeling, falling. Again, his awful scream of pain and terror rent the air.

Like great, saw-toothed pincers, the coleopteron's mandibles stabbed in. The Ulno's cry cut off in bubbling death.

The crowd shrieked savage exaltation.

Once more, contempt, revulsion, gripped Haral. Thin-lipped, he worked his way around the ring towards Sark.

Laughter — ghoulish, obscene — rocked the raider chief. His rolls of fat shook. Tears of sheer sadistic glee spilled down his puffy cheeks.

But he still kept his hand on the switch set in the arm of the riding-chair.

Bleak, watchful, Haral brought the *hwalon* to a halt in the lee of the wall nearest the arena. With the casualness of long habit, he surveyed the crowd, the ground, the disposition of Sark's forces.

In the same instant, he caught himself wondering whether Sark would laugh as loud by the time this day was done.

Or whether either he or Sark would live to laugh.

He smiled wryly.

But now, for the time, the raider's mirth had passed. A sudden air of suppressed tension came into his manner. His fleshy hand came up in a curt, peremptory gesture.

Instantly, two leering reptilian *Pervods* from his crews dragged forward another victim.

But this time their prey was no quaking Ulno.

Instead, they held a woman.

A taut, furious excitement surged up within Haral. He sucked in air; leaned forward, gripping the *hwalon's* saddle hard between his knees.

Sark gestured. The *Pervods* drag-

ged their prisoner to him.

**S**HE was young. Haral saw now; young, and slim, and incredibly lovely. Hair like spun gold hung to her waist—the silken blonde hair of the *Shamon*, the race that had ruled Ulna in the days before the renegades of a dozen worlds poured in from across the void to make the planetoid a blood-drenched, anarchistic madhouse.

But more than her face or body, it was her garb that held the blue man.

For she wore the blue cloak of Xaymar's order, and against her high, proud breasts hung the shining *toloid* metal tablet that signified her consecration.

Once more, the gross monster that was *Gar Sark* leaned forward. He spoke to the girl in a gentle, beguiling voice that struck a clashing paradox with the fiend's own soul that dwelt within him: "They call you *Kyla*, do they not?" He touched the tablet that rested upon her breasts. A webbed finger traced the lightning-bolt symbol emblazoned on it. "*Kyla*, virgin priestess to the veiled woman-goddess *Xaymar*, the one your people call the queen of storms . . ."

The blue man could see the tremor that rippled through the girl at *Sark's* grisly touch. But she did not quail. When she spoke, her voice was steady.

"That is true."

"*Xaymar*, queen of storms . . ."

the raider chief repeated softly. He leaned back in the riding-chair, eyes sleepy and low-lidded. "She once lived, did she not, in mortal form? Here, on your planetoid of *Ulna*?"

"Yes. That is what the stories say."

"At her command, the storm-clouds gathered? She hurled the lightning bolts against her enemies?"

"So it is written in our sacred books."

"But then she went away," *Sark* murmured. "She left all you who were her people."

The girl called *Kyla* did not answer.

"Or did she?" Of a sudden the raider's lidded eyes were not so sleepy. His bulbous head came forward just a fraction. "There is another story, priestess . . . a story that says the goddess *Xaymar* was truly woman—the most beautiful woman your world had ever seen. And because she was woman, human, she could not bear the thought that she must age and wither. So she commanded that she be placed, still young and in the full bloom of her beauty, within a secret crypt in frozen sleep, so that she might live forever as she had been."

**F**OR an instant *Haral* thought he could see a new tremor touch the priestess *Kyla's* slim young body. But only for an instant. Then her shoulders straightened. Her tone was cool, disdainful: "These are old wives' tales our stupid *Ulnos* tell—



empty, without meaning. Xaymar was not even of my people, if indeed she ever lived. The old books say she came from a forgotten alien race, long vanished."

Haral felt a sudden rush of admiration—a kinship, almost, born of the girl's poise and unbending courage.

What path had she traveled to this final meeting? What forces had driven her to do whatever she had done to catch Sark's notice? Why was she playing for such stakes in a mad world filled with monsters?

What forces? His jaw tightened. Why had he, himself, come? Why was he throwing his own life into the balance? There could be no answer; not really. Not even five hundred *samori* were enough to account for it. A man did the things that he must do—played the crazy game as he saw it and made up the reasons later; that was all. Raider, priestess, adventurer—each carved his own destiny.

Even Sark . . .

The raider chief was smiling now—a slow, smirking, secretive smile that was somehow horrible and loathsome. "But the other part, priestess? Is it true? Was your Xaymar really sealed in frozen sleep in a hidden vault here on your pygmy world of Ulna?"

The girl's slim shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Who knows? We *Shamon* only let the tales go on to satisfy the Ulnos."

"What? You do not know?" Sark's

fat-rimmed eyes now were bright and mocking; and, watching him, Haral gave new weight to the raider's craft and menace. "But I had heard a different story, Priestess Kyla! They told me you *did* know—that you knew more of it than any other."

It was coming now, the moment of crisis. Haral could see it in their faces.

Grimly, he gripped his light-lance.

But Kyla still faced the raider chieftain boldly. "I cannot help what others say. I do not know."

The squat monster in the riding-chair leaned back once more, still smiling his secretive, sinister smile. A strange horror clung to his very calm, the deadly benignity of his soft-spoken words. It was as if he were some great toad, toying tenderly with a lovely, captive moth that its agony might last the longer.

"They say your whole life is given to a search for Xaymar, priestess. That you dream of the days when the *Shamon* still ruled Ulna, and so you seek your goddess's hidden crypt, in order to rouse her from her sleep and turn her powers against all those whom you call alien." He licked his lips, and his head seemed to sink between his shoulders. "Some claim you even know where the crypt is hidden, and could go there now, were it not for fear of the thinking beetles, the coleoptera."

**S**LOWLY, the color drained from Kyla's face. A spark close akin

to panic lighted in her eyes. She did not speak.

"Why do you blanch so, priestess?" Sark prodded. "I only seek to help you. Tell me where your goddess lies and I'll find her for you, in spite of the coleoptera. I'll bring her here, revive her, let her reign again among you—"

"You talk nonsense!" the girl cried. But her voice broke. Her whole body trembled.

Now, suddenly, Sark seemed to grow within the riding chair, till he loomed like some gross giant. His lips drew back from his stained reptilian fangs. His eyes gleamed like burning coals. The mock-benignity, the gentleness, fell from him like a mask. His words slashed, low and savage: "Tell me where your bitch-goddess lies, you she-sabar! Tell me now, while you still have a voice to speak!"

"No, no—"

"So, virgin priestess—?" Sark's laugh rang like the mirth of hell. And then, with furious, fiendish passion: "You'll tell, or you'll not stay virgin long! There are mutants among my crews who have strange lusts. Press me too far, and you'll be the one to sate them! I'll turn them loose with you here in this arena as a show for the rest of us to see! What's left of your tender flesh when they are through will make a tasty morsel for the coleoptera!"

Sheer horror flooded Kyla's pale, lovely face. Convulsively, she tried to tear free from the grip of the

two *Pervods* who held her.

But they laughed aloud and jerked her back; lifted her upright before their chief, panting and struggling.

Haral sucked in air. In spite of himself, he dug his knees hard into the *hwalon's* horny flanks. It took all his effort to hold himself otherwise immobile and fight down the fury that surged within him.

"Which shall it be, Priestess Kyla?" Sark now mocked with savage malice. "Do you talk and live, or meet my men? The choice is yours!"

FOR a moment the girl's eyes closed. Then, slowly, they opened once more, and she stood erect in the *Pervods'* grasp. Her breath came faster. "Do you think me so weak that I'd betray my goddess and my people to save myself?" she cried passionately. A wave of wild, half-hysterical laughter shook her. "I know what you want! You seek not Xaymar, but Xaymar's secret—the way she harnessed the power that lies within the lightning, a power so great that with it you might rule the universe! But you will not have it! Bring on your crew, your coleoptera—"

Haral went rigid in the *hwalon's* saddle. The girl's words rang in his ears, his brain.

There it was! There lay the secret, the prize that had lured Sark here to Ulna!

A prize of power.

The search for it had led this

slim girl-priestess here, to death, dishonor.

The fear that such a secret might go to Sark, be lost to Ulna, had spurred the old high priest, Namboina, to dark plots and plans for murder.

Power! Haral's fist clenched. The lust for it had driven him on bloody courses that stretched across half this solar system. It had earned him a name, that lust; and then it had put a price on his head to match it, till at last he'd had no choice but to flee out here, beyond all law, to this mad, twisted, world of Ulna.

And now—?

Within him his heart was pounding, pounding, like the beat of one of Titan's great *corba dia*; and of a sudden he knew it was destiny that had brought him to the blood and dirt and heat of this foul arena.

His own dark destiny that had marked him out from day of birth to carve an empire . . .

As from afar, he heard Sark's furious voice lashing out at Kyla: "Defy me, will you? Then so be it!" The raider surged up, half out of the riding-chair. Savagely, he slapped the slim girl-priestess across the face, so hard that his webbed fingers left great welts of white and scarlet. "To the ring with her! To the ring!"

The *Pervods* jerked Kyla back. Roughly, they dragged her to the fenced ring that served as pit for the arena and threw her in.

In his turn, the blue man shifted. The tension was running high within him now, locked in the icy bands of iron-nerved control. Once more, he surveyed the howling crowd and Sark's mongrel raider crewmen, then smiled to himself with dark, reckless mirth.

Fat face still livid, Sark sank back into the depths of his riding-chair. "Who's first?" he cried. "Who wants to test the brave priestess?"

A shout burst forth from a hundred savage throats. A churning mass of nightmare forms of life thrust forward.

But before the raider chief could even make a choice, a huge, hairy, heavy-thewed Uranian *dau* was charging to the fence. Full seven feet tall he stood, and he bowled the others from his path like *byul*-balls, a living avalanche of lust. Leaping high in the air, he caught the top strand of the cable and swung up and over, dropping into the arena like some monstrous, many-armed Earth gorilla.

The girl called Kyla stared at the creature as if paralyzed with horror. She did not even raise her hands.

"I give you your last thought as a chaste priestess!" Sark cried, taunting. "You shared your secret with another—the high priest, him they call Namboina! He, too, knows where Xaymar's crypt lies hidden! So all your stubbornness has gained you nothing, for I'll tear the truth from him even though you die here!"

Kyla's tragic eyes went wide—shocked, half-disbelieving.

Haral breathed deep. The tension was a tight knot in his stomach now. His hand grew sweaty against the light-lance.

Slavering, the Uranian shambled towards Kyla. The mad din of the crowd grew deafening.

A churning excitement boiled within the blue warrior. This was the moment for which he'd come; this was the final peak of crisis.

The *dau* lunged.

In one smooth flow of motion, Haral whipped up the light-lance. Its beam speared out, stabbing at the *dau*.

The lumbering creature stumbled and swerved, twisting in a sudden, agonized frenzy. Smoke curled from the matted hair of its massive torso. It tottered—fell back a step—another—another. Then, arms and legs jerking spasmodically, head out of control, it crumpled into the gory dirt of the arena and lay twitching.

A thunderous, stupefied silence fell upon the crowd. Creatures from the far-flung planets of the whole solar system stared in blank disbelief.

Then, suddenly, the shocked spell broke; and Sark was on his feet and shrieking, "Seize him! Kill him! Blast him down!"

The mob surged forward.

But now Haral was moving too, booting his great blue *hwalon* dragon into the screaming throng, clawing and slashing and trampling. A force ray struck him a hammer

blow between the shoulders, but its impact broke on the heavy copronium armor and he paid it no heed. His light-lance blazed—again; again. A *Pervod* fell. A *Malya* writhed back in his death throes.

Then the *hwalon* was surging against the fence that bounded the arena. The blue man roared, "Kyla—!" And, to the crowd: "Back! Back—! Stand back or die!"

The wave of bodies broke. The milling mass gave way.

Savagely, Haral slashed at the cables with his lance-beam.

**S**NAPPING like tight-drawn strings, they parted. Already, beyond, the girl-priestess Kyla was running up beside him. Sweeping low in the saddle, he caught her arm and lifted her bodily to a place in front of him astride the *hwalon*.

But if the crowd, the rabble, was falling back, Sark's raiders now were forming.

Again Haral spurred the *hwalon*—driving it forward, straight at the mutant chieftain.

"You—Sark! Call off your pack if you want to live!" he cried.

He leveled the light-lance, like a helium hammer to drive home his words.

Sark's face took on the color of the molten purple mud in Mercury's *sotol* swamps. Spasmodically, he clutched the switch set in his chair-arm. His voice, his body, shook with seething fury. "Who are you, *chitza*, that you should come so long a way

to die?"

Haral brought the *hwalon* to a halt, so close to the raider chief that the lance's ray-head gouged Sark's gross midriff.

"They call me Haral," he slashed back fiercely. "Perhaps you've heard the name—if they ever let you pause to listen where warriors spoke. As for dying, I'll meet that when it comes. But not from you, Sark. Not here; not now."

The raider's webbed fingers flexed and clenched. His fat-rimmed eyes glinted like murderous Titanian diamonds set in flesh.

"Haral—?" A sneer contorted his fat face. "A raider without a ship. A space tramp soaked in *kabat*." He bared his teeth. "You fool! What chance do you think you have? My men surround you, ready to blast you!"

Haral laughed aloud. "And what happens to the woman—Xaymar's priestess, Kyla?" he challenged harshly. "Her body's pressed next to mine. Can your blasters kill me, and let her live? Can they burn my armor through, yet leave her still unharmed?" Again he laughed, and the fierce recklessness he felt poured out in hot, slashing words. "No, Sark! You can't afford to have her die, no matter how you'd shame her or abuse her to break her spirit and make her speak. For though you talk of the old high priest, Namboina, you can't know for sure how much she told him. Your crew hasn't even managed to catch him. So if

this woman dies, it may well be that your only chance for the goddess Xaymar's secret will die with her!"

In the same instant, he wondered bleakly what would happen if he'd guessed Sark and the situation wrong.

A veil seemed to fall across the raider's eyes. When he spoke, his voice had lost its fury. Now it was gentle again, almost—low-pitched, persuasive, as it had been when he first talked to Kyla.

"I've heard the tales they tell of you, Haral, and they all say that you're mad—mad with ambition, mad with daring. You want the whole universe for your own, they say, and you'll throw your own life on the block to claim it. But even ambition and daring can go too far."

He paused and eyed Haral. Then, when the blue man made no answer, he went on again. The persuasive note in his voice grew stronger.

"Can't you see what you're doing, warrior? I'm *gar* of the raiders. If I let you carry off this woman, it means the end of me. Every *stabat* on the spaceways will say, 'Sark has lost his strength. Sark has let Haral take a woman from him.' Even my own crews would mutiny against me."

"And so—?"

"So I cannot let you go, Haral. No matter what the cost. I must kill you. If not now, then later. If you take the woman, you must die!"

Haral could feel his stomach muscles quiver. The menace that radiated out from Sark hung over him like some deadly cloud.

Baring his own teeth in a death's-head grin, he dug the light-lance deeper into Sark's rolls of flesh.

He said: "If the things you say are true, *Gar* Sark, then I must kill you now, before you have the chance to slay me." He allowed himself the luxury of a thin, wry smile. "In fact, perhaps it would be best that way. With you dead, your men might pick me as their leader . . ."

Silence echoed for a moment long as eternity, while their eyes locked in a fierce, interminable battle.

Then, slowly, Sark smiled and shook his head. His webbed fingers caressed the switch set in his chair-arm.

"You'll never kill me, warrior," he answered Haral. "I have a reason for this riding-chair, a reason beyond mere comfort."

Haral said nothing.

"This switch"—the raider closed his hand about it—"connects with the box that hangs beneath me. A cymosynthesizer box, you may have guessed."

"A cymosynthesizer—?"

"A very special kind of cymosynthesizer, warrior." Sark chuckled grimly. "The multiplying waves of energy it radiates are synthesized and focused on the core of this pygmy planetoid of Ulna. When they strike it, they'll disrupt its whole

atomic structure and set up a disintegrative chain reaction."

Haral stared at him, unbelieving. "You mean—?"

"I mean that I hold the power to destroy this whole world within my hand!" Sark cried in sudden, explosive anger. "This is my protection against you and all others! I have but to throw this switch, and Ulna itself will be torn asunder—and you and the woman and all else with it! If I die, you die, also! That is my answer to you, *chitza!*"

**H**ARAL said tightly: "You lie! No cymosynthesizer can set up an initiating wave strong enough to tear apart a whole planet!"

"Then try me! Make me prove it!" the raider chieftain spat. "It's simple, warrior! Just trigger a beam from your light-lance through me! As I die, I'll still throw the switch, and there will be your answer!"

Haral sat very still. He was gripping his lance's shaft so hard that the very bones of his fingers ached. A thin rill of sweat ran down his spine. Yet he could not fight off the spell of shock that gripped him.

As if sensing it, Sark spoke once more in coaxing tones: "You make your task hard, warrior. There is an easier way. Give up this madness, this trying to beat me and destroy me. Daring is a virtue I, too, admire. Stay with me and I'll make you a captain in my fleet, give you a ship so you can raid again. Then, when I've won this thrice-cursed

Xaymar's secret, together we'll reach out across the universe to bring all planets into our power. Or, if it's the woman you want,"—he laughed his smirking, obscene laugh—"why, as soon as she's told me the things I want to know, I'll let you have her—"

Haral felt Kyla's slim body stiffen against him. A tremor ran through her.

His answer to Sark came almost-without volition. "No."

"What—?"

The spell was broken, now. The recklessness was back, and the fierce surge of ambition.

That, and something more . . . a something Haral could not quite touch.

He laughed aloud. "I'm leaving now, Sark!" he cried. "I'm leaving, and I'm taking the woman with me. Blast us if you will!"

The blandness fell from Sark. He half rose from his seat, his face contorted. "You *chitza*—!"

Haral laughed again. "Blast, Sark!" he mocked. "But if you do, remember—your chance for the girl dies with me!"

"*Stabat! zanat! Starbo*—"

"Go ahead, great *gar*! Blast us! Take your chances on what you can learn from old Namboina!"

Slowly, then, Sark sank back into his chair. His eyes were like live coals, incredibly baleful.

"Go!" he choked thickly. "Go, for now, you *chitza*! Take your woman and your *hwalon* and your

light-lance! My day will come, and when it does, you'll pray for a death that will not answer! You and the woman—you'll share your agony together, and in the end I'll still claim Xaymar's secret—"

Haral said: "Perhaps. Or perhaps it will be you who rots in hell instead."

Bleakly, he wheeled the *hwalon*; and to the crowd he shouted, "There's death in my lance for the man that follows!" Then, weapon ready, the girl close against him, heedless of the steaming hate and curses of the mob that parted before him, he rode away.

### CHAPTER III

THEY rode fast and in silence—first skirting the outskirts of the town; then plunging full-tilt into the tangled maze that was the native quarter.

The Ulno Haral had hired on the chance he'd need someone to hide the *hwalon* was already waiting at the appointed place.

But the blue man rode on past the primitive with no sign of recognition, pausing instead around the next corner, by the entrance to a blackly burrow-like dead-end alley.

There he let the girl called Kyla down. For the first time since their escape, he spoke to her: "We'll take cover now, for a little while, priestess. Wait here in the shadows for me till I can hide my dragon. It won't take long—ten *samori*, may-

be."

Wordless, eyes inscrutable, the lovely *Shamon* nodded.

Haral flashed her a tense smile. Then, wheeling the *hwalon*, he rode back in the direction from which they'd come.

But the instant he was out of sight around the corner, he dropped from the saddle and waved up the *Ulno* to take the nightmare steed.

Another moment, and he was peering warily towards the spot where he'd left *Kyla*.

But already the slim young priestess had abandoned her post. She was hurrying away, instead—running off down the narrow, crooked street, just as he'd gambled that she would.

It was ever dusk in these cramped warrens, where the yellow sky showed only straight up. Now, too, the purple *Ulnese* night drew near at hand. Black rivers of shadow were taking form at the bases of the buildings.

Taking advantage of every unevenness and entryway and patch of murk, Haral followed *Kyla*.

The girl led him a dizzy chase through jumbled streets and alleys, a world of strange smells and sounds and dull-witted, blank-eyed, two-headed *Ulnos*. Twice, only the glint of her long, blonde, *Shamon* hair kept him from losing her.

Then, abruptly, she halted.

Giving no attention to the vaguely-curious glances of nearby *Ulnos*,

Haral drew back into the angle where two buildings came together. Pressed flat to the wall, he watched while *Kyla* peered this way and that, as if searching for some sign of pursuit.

A moment later she disappeared into the shadow-shrouded entrance of a shabby building.

Swiftly, Haral ran after her. But instead of approaching the door, he slipped down a narrow cleft between the place she'd entered and the one next to it.

A slot of window showed above him. Bracing his back against one wall, his feet against the other, he levered himself swiftly upward till he could peer through the casement.

It opened into an empty room.

A kick from one mailed foot burst it open. Another moment, and Haral himself stood inside.

Across the room was a door. Moving silently to it, he opened it a crack and listened.

From down the hall that ran outside came faint sounds of movement. Peering through the gloom, Haral caught a glint of light. Then a door opened. More light flooded out. He glimpsed *Kyla* in silhouette as she left the one room and went into another.

Now light blazed from the second room. Then that door closed, and there were sounds of running water.

Haral smiled thinly and loosened



his ray-gun in its holster. Quickly, quietly, he walked down the hall to the room from which the girl had come.

Bleak and bare and windowless, it was sparsely furnished with a cot, table and two chairs. The clothes Kyla had worn—the cloak, the tablet, all her priestess' habit—were strewn across the cot. One of the self-sealing plastic boxes such as was used on Ulna for packing garments lay open on the table.

Across the hall, the sounds of running water ceased.

Silently, Haral stepped on into the room and behind the door. He caught the click of a latch: then the firm rhythm of Kyla's footsteps as she came towards this chamber where he stood in hiding.

She was humming softly as she entered—a weirdly lilting tune Haral had never heard before. Now, too, she wore the scant, filmy garments so favored by *Shamon* women. No indication that she was one of Xaymar's priestesses remained. While Haral watched in silence, she picked up a comb and began to smooth her shimmering, waist-long wealth of silken hair.

Haral said: "You're very lovely, Kyla—you treacherous little *slazot!*"

The girl whirled, her eyes suddenly big with terror. Her hand clutched her throat. Her breasts rose and fell too fast.

Her lips moved: "You— You . . ."

Haral poured acid into his voice:

"My name's Haral, Kyla. Remember? I'm the man who saved your pretty carcass from Sark's arena not so very long ago."

The priestess sank into a chair. Her eyes closed, as if she were praying, or perhaps trying to blot out the very sight of the blue man from her brain.

Tight-lipped, Haral strode to her. He caught her chin and tilted back her head.

"Did you think I risked my life for you for nothing, priestess?" he clipped grimly. "Some say I'm worthless. But in my way, I still value my head."

**K**YLA'S eyes opened. They were very large and innocent. "Truly, I am grateful, blue warrior . . ."

"Grateful—?" Haral brought up the crooked forefinger that held her chin so savagely her head snapped back. "Yes, you're grateful! So grateful you could hardly wait till my back was turned before you ran away! So grateful you'd gladly leave me to face Sark's tender mercies alone, so long as you got to cover!"

"But, warrior— You do not understand. I have a mission—a duty bigger than you or me, or the debt of gratitude I owe you—"

"Duty—?" Haral smashed one mailed fist into the palm of the other. "Will your duty save my neck? Will it halt Sark's crewmen as they haunt me and harry me and

hunt me down?"

The girl's lips trembled. The violet eyes dodged his. "But—but—what would you have me do—?"

"You know what I want!" Haral gripped her shoulders. "My death warrant's sealed. You heard Sark say it. I've got just one chance—one, and one only. With your Xaymar's secret, it may be that I can smash Sark before he smashes me—"

"No—"

"That's what I want! I want the secret—your goddess, your queen of storms—"

"But I cannot —"

"You can! You will!" Fiercely, he shook her. "Where is she, Kyla? Where does she lie, this woman-goddess, Xaymar?"

The girl went limp in his grasp. Tears brimmed her eyes.

Slowly, Haral straightened. He let go the priestess' slim shoulders. "Can't you see?" he grated tightly. "Can't you understand? Now, this very moment, Sark's hunting for your doddering high priest, Namboina. When he catches him—and he will catch him, have no doubt of that—he'll tear your goddess's hiding-place from him like a tooth from the socket. Then where will you stand? What good will all your talk of duty do you? Would it not be better—"

"No." Even though Kyla's lips still trembled, there was no compromise in her tone. She flicked away her tears, and her back drew very straight. Her eyes met Haral's

—defiant; proud and steady as his own.

"No, blue man," she repeated. "If helping me costs you your life, I'm sorry. But my duty lies with Ulna and with Xaymar. Do what you will; I'll tell you nothing."

"And Namboina? What of him? Will his loyalty match yours when Sark stretches him out for a taste of torture?"

"Sark has not yet caught Namboina."

AS it had in the arena, admiration now touched Haral. Steel lay sheathed in the velvet of this *Shamon* girl's slim, soft body. He could not but respect its temper.

Yet he dared not let her know his thoughts.

Instead, coldly, he drew his ray-gun from its holster. "Then I have no choice . . ."

"You'll kill me, you mean—?" There was contempt in the girl's voice, the twist of her lips. "So in the end you're not so different from *Gar* Sark, after all."

Haral smiled thinly. "Say rather that I know enough to bow to reality when I face it. If I cannot win this battle, then I must come to terms another way." He let his smile broaden, building up impact for the climax. "But not by killing you, Priestess Kyla. That truly would get me nothing.

"Then what—?"

Haral shrugged. With careful casualness he said. "Sark still might

strike a bargain for you."

"Sark—!"

The shock in the girl's voice stabbed at Haral. Fear was in her eyes now—the bright, shiny fear of those nightmare eternities she stood helpless in Sark's arena.

But the blue man held his face immobile. "You leave me no choice," he clipped. "I must either have the lightning-force, the secret of your goddess Xaymar, or I must buy back my life from Sark. Since I lack the stomach to force the secret from you, that leaves only Sark for me to turn to. You surely understand."

He watched the sickness come to Kyla's face, then. Her eyes closed. Her tongue flicked at her lips.

At long last she looked at him again. Dully, she said, "Put away your weapon, warrior. I am vanquished."

Wordless, Haral slipped the ray-gun back into its holster.

Kyla said: "I'd hoped this might have another ending, blue man. When you rode out in the face of *Gar* Sark and all his might to save me, my heart leaped, and strange feelings woke within me, here." She touched her breast. "I saw you as a Galahad of the spaceways, a valiant who fought for right and honor instead of booty. But now I see you true. You're as the rest—greedy, blood-thirsty, driven by hate and a lust for power."

A knife seemed to twist deep in Haral's vitals. He did not speak.

THE girl's great, tragic eyes stayed set upon him. "Yet, blue man, you saved my life. There is indeed a debt of gratitude I owe you. I'll pay it now . . ."

She rose; came close to him. Her hand touched the heavy copronium brassard that sheathed his upper arm.

"There's a reason our living goddess Xaymar has lain sleeping through all these years of Ulna's sorrow, blue man," she told him tensely. "Did you think my people, my proud, unbending *Shamon*, would have suffered all the insults and degradation you alien raiders brought here with you had it not been so? Can you vision us submitting to your despoilment while we held an invincible weapon in our hands, unless the dangers that lay in unsheathing that weapon were even more dreadful than the worst that you, in your crude butchery, could offer?"

Haral shifted. Frowning, he studied the priestess' shadowed eyes and strain-straight face.

She breathed deep. Her words rushed forth in a flood, a frantic, half-hysterical jumble:

"I'll tell you the secret, warrior! I'll tell you why we left our goddess sleeping through all our hour of need!" Her lips parted. Her voice rose shrilly. "She's mad, that's the reason! Xaymar's mad! Mad with lust and power, and passion! Her beauty was a thing of shining splendor that no man could resist or deny. Each night she took a dif-

ferent lover—and then, at the dawn, at her command, each one was slain! She harnessed the lightning against our enemies—and when our own greatest city refused to send more of its sons to her for slaughter, she smashed it to rubble with her bolts! In her madness, it was she who gave the power of thought to the coleoptera—”

She broke off, laughing wildly. Her face came close to Haral's, her body against his.

“Would you waken her, warrior? Would you be the next to share her couch—and her graveyard? Beside her, Sark ranks as a saint—”

There was a prickling along Haral's spine as he pushed her back. But she still clung to him. He could feel his tension climbing. It was as if Kyla had hypnotized him with her rush of words, her fierce burst of emotion.

He said tightly: “You lie, Kyla! This is some kind of a trick—”

Like magic, her hysteria vanished. “A trick? Of course! A good one—”

She twisted, and he felt the wrench of his ray-gun being jerked from its holster.

Before he could move, she had its muzzle between his teeth. Her triumphant voice echoed like the ring of steel on steel:

“Your first move will be your last, blue man! You'll die if even a finger twitches!”

Haral stood very still.

From somewhere below came the

creak of a door opening, then the muffled slam of its closing.

Kyla laughed. Her eyes sparkled. “Did you speak of Namboina, warrior? Of how Sark would catch him? Yet here he comes now!”

Haral spoke carefully: “Wrong, priestess! Those steps are too quick for old Namboina's!”

**W**ATCHING her eyes, he could see the doubt flicker, then flare into panic. Her lips parted as she strained to hear. She fell back a step. The ray-gun in her hand was suddenly shaking.

“If there's trouble,” Haral observed, “that gun might prove surer in my hand than yours.”

“No! Stand back!” the girl cried. “I'll shoot for your face! Your armor won't save you!”

The blue man halted.

The approaching footsteps were closer now—coming lightly, swiftly, towards this room.

Kyla pushed the door half shut, then stepped to its hinge side, gesturing Haral to a place before her. Her face was grey.

Outside the room, the footsteps halted. The door pushed open.

“Kyla—”

It was the voice of a woman—a woman in the garb of Naymar's order who hurried into the room.

“Lyess—” cried Kyla. The ray-gun sagged in her hand.

The newcomer whirled in fright. Her eyes flicked from the priestess to Haral.

Kyla cried, "Why are you here, Lyess? Where is Namboina?" Her tone held a note of desperation.

"I came to tell you, Kyla—to warn you! Sark has found him! They say the torture is already under way to make him tell where Xaymar lies—"

Unspeaking, Haral looked to Kyla.

Her mouth was working. New tears had come to her eyes. Now, of a sudden, they overflowed and spilled down her cheeks.

Harshly, Haral slashed: "What now, priestess? Do we wait here while Sark tears out Namboina's heart, then goes and wakens your mad woman-goddess Xaymar?"

Slowly, the hand that held the ray-gun lowered, till the weapon hung loose against Kyla's side. Her shoulders, too, slumped. In the stillness, her falling tears made tiny splatting sounds as they hit the floor.

"Kyla, Kyla—!" the other priestess whispered. "You dare not linger! Sark seeks you, too. That is why I came to warn you—"

**A** GAIN the silence echoed. Then, wearily, Kyla straightened. She shook away the tears. Her mouth stopped quivering.

Never had she been more lovely.

She turned to the blue man: "Haral . . ."

It came to him, with a queer sort of shock, that it was the first time she had ever called him by his

name.

"Yes, Kyla . . .?"

"I've lost. I wanted Xaymar's secret for my people—this world of ours, this Ulna. But now, that cannot be. The most I can hope is that Sark, at least, shall never have it."

"Yes, Kyla."

"She—Xaymar—lies in the dead land—the land infested by the great thinking beetles, the coleoptera. The road to her crypt is a dangerous road."

"I've traveled dangerous roads before."

"Yes. Danger is in your blood, you aliens. And we of Ulna are weak, so weak . . ."

Gently, Haral said: "There's little time, Kyla. Namboina may be babbling all he knows already."

"Yes, and the way is long." Wearily, then, the girl held out the ray-gun to him. "You'll need this more than I, along the road that we must travel." She sighed. "You see, Haral? Destiny is on your side. In the end, you are the winner."

## CHAPTER IV

**T**HE coleoptera were drawing their noose ever tighter now. A killer cordon, they ringed in Kyla and Haral. The rustle of their giant wing-sheaths, borne on the night wind, whispered of death. The great, flesh-rendering mandibles clacked like the distant rattle of dry bones.

Flat on his belly amid this rub-

ble that once had been a mighty city, the blue warrior let his head sink forward onto his arms. He closed his eyes, and weariness welled up in him, a dull, relentlessly-rising tide.

Pain throbbed along his whole left side, and blood still dripped from his numb left hand. Silently—absently, almost—he touched the shoulder-plate of his armor, probing the perforations and the wound.

Then a sound of spilling gravel came through the darkness. He looked up sharply.

A dozen yards to one side, one of the great scarlet beetles was clambering atop a heap of crumbling stone. Its wing-sheaths scraped harshly—a rasping, off-key note.

Kyla leaned close. Her words came, a fearful whisper, barely loud enough to hear: "Lift your helmet, blue man! Listen to the things the coleopteron tells—but carefully, lest its mind control should seize you . . ."

Cautiously, Haral tilted back his battered copronium headpiece. It had rendered strange service in its day, that scarred old helm; but none stranger than this. For by some weird clash between its metal and certain electrocephalic wave-pulsations, it guarded his brain from the probing beetle minds, just as Kyla's bucket-like Ulnese heaume—designed for the purpose—guarded hers.

Now, as Haral lifted the helmet, thought-vibrations washed in on him in throbbing waves: "Man-things,

man-things! Find the man-things! Kill the man-things! Kill, kill, kill!"

A new vibration slashed through, fiercely urgent: "Blood! Blood! Here! They came this way!"

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Already the coleoptera were surging forward. Antennae outthrust like lance-points, Q-rays probing, they combed the murky waste—each rise, each hollow. Their feet slithered through the rubble with sounds like the writhings of Venus' great snake-things in dry leaves. The acrid stink of their hate crept on the breeze in biting tendrils.

**H**ARAL cast a longing glance back towards his *hwalon*, still standing at bay amid the crags where they had lost it in their last swift, clashing contact with the beetles.

But darting Q-rays hemmed in the dragon. And here and there between, a head, a leg, a thorax showed.

Haral bit down hard. The coleoptera were hoping they could tempt him to try to regain the *hwalon*.

For if he tried, he'd die in seconds.

Kyla crept close against him. Her voice shook: "I've lost my way, Haral. Even if the beetles were to leave us, I'd not know how to go."

For an aching moment Haral lay still. "I guessed as much," he said at last. "This running and fighting has pulled us from our path."

"If we could only find one of the pylons of which the old books spoke—"

"Yes. If." Grimly, the blue man fumbled the ray-pistol from his holster and shoved it into Kyla's hand. He gave no sign that he had even caught the tears, the desperation, creeping into her voice. "Here. Take this."

"What—?"

Haral held his voice flat, without emotion. "You'll need some weapon. The ray-gun will do as well as any." He settled the helmet more firmly on his head and took a new grip on his light-lance. "Come on!"

Twisting, dragging the light-lance beside him, he wormed his way towards the nearest of the skeletal shafts that rose like gravestones over this dead city, last monuments to a civilization fallen into dust.

Perhaps the shaft had been part of a building, once—a wall, a buttress, maybe. Now, pillar-like, it stood alone. Gaping holes showed through its mass. Great chunks of rock had fallen, here and there exposing the huge, corroding metal beams that were its core.

They reached its base. Haral pulled himself erect amid the black shadows cloaking the foundation. Warily, he leaned against a fallen column.

The move brought fragments rattling down.

At the sound, a coleopteron in a nearby hollow came to a sudden halt. For a moment it hesitated, then

began to work its way warily towards the shaft.

Kyla said, "Haral—!" in a voice choked with new panic.

"Stay here. Don't move," Haral clipped tightly. "And don't shoot—not unless you have to!"

As he spoke, he levered himself up onto the lowest beam.

More broken stone clattered to the ground below him.

The beetle came forward faster.

**A**WKWARDLY, the blue man climbed upward. His left arm was almost useless. The light-lance dragged and got in his way.

Below, the great scarlet insect stopped short. Of a sudden its mandibles clacked wildly.

Haral lifted his helmet a fraction. Vibrations poured into his brain: "Blood! Here, here, this way—!"

Cursing, Haral whipped up the light-lance and triggered a beam at the beetle's thorax.

The coleopteron wallowed backward, great wings thrashing.

Clutching a vertical girder, again the warrior clambered upward.

Above him, and to one side, a gap that might once have housed a window loomed. Painfully, he worked towards it. His left arm dragged, less help than hindrance. He couldn't seem to get in air. His body rebelled at his brain's commands.

Then, at last, he got a grip on a jagged fragment near the edge of the slot-like opening. With a final,

spasmodic effort, he dragged himself up and sprawled on his belly across the masonry.

On the other side of the wall, spread out before him in the shadowy purple of the Ulnese night, lay the heart of the dead city. From this height he could see its plan, its prospect. There, ragged strips that once had been broad avenues radiated out from a central park. There, a spider-web of cross streets showed, linking the great arteries together.

And there, too, were the ruins Kyla called the Triad—the huge, three-winged structure that rose in the park's heart.

Somewhere beneath it lay the shrine of Xaymar, queen of storms, living goddess of all Ulna.

Awe gripped Haral. Silent, brooding, he stared across the fallen splendor.

Such splendor, so far fallen.

These others, who once had walked this mighty city in its day of greatness—they, too, had been strong. They, too, had felt the drive to power.

Now they lay in dust beneath his feet.

And here he sprawled, beset and wounded, driven by a dream on a madman's quest, mayhap to meet death himself in this silent city of the dead.

His weariness welled up once more; engulfed him.

How had Sark put it—"Why have you come so long a way to die?"

Sark, and a dream turned night-

mare.

Yet he'd ridden other nightmares in his time, with less to gain and more to lose. That was the meaning of life: the challenge.

There below lay a living goddess; and a priestess-waited to guide him to her.

A priestess . . . He pondered. Already there was a bond between them, for she had a courage to match her beauty, and courage was one trait he gave full honor, no matter what the cause to which it rallied. And it had taken courage to stand in the bloody mud of that arena, defying Sark.

Sark? . . . Haral smiled. Sark, too, would have a role to play before this game was done.

Sark had pledged him death. Sark would keep that pledge, unless he fell before the might of Xaymar's vaunted secret.

And as for himself, Haral—?

The battle lines were drawn: On the one hand, power beyond his fondest dreams . . . a living goddess . . . a lovely priestess.

On the other, Sark and the coleoptera, defeat and death.

What more was there for a fighting man to ask? What better prize for a wanderer to strive for as he carved his way up from the asteroids' bleak want and bondage?

He laughed aloud. His weariness fell away.

Sitting up, turning, he once more gave attention to the swarming scar-



let beetles far below him.

Fear of his light-lance was upon them now, it seemed. They hung back, spread out in a menacing arc that centered on his side of the pillar.

Directly below him, Kyla crouched as if frozen, the ray-gun ready in her hand. But as yet the beetles had not come close enough to find her.

Haral shifted.

Like lightning, a Q-ray speared up from an ebon crevice to one side of the shaft.

The range was too great. The beam burned out yards short of Haral. But a flicker of movement betrayed that one of the monster insects now was climbing along the other side. The next ray might strike home.

Again, Haral sought out the Triad, and the great arterial avenue that led to it.

The nearest of the roadways lay within a hundred yards of this column that was his vantage-point. A pylon still thrust its weathered peak skyward on the far side of the thoroughfare.

A pylon: the crumbling, truncated pyramid burned into Haral's brain like a beacon. The very sight of it sent recklessness surging through him.

To Kyla, below, he cried, "Come round the wall, priestess! Come round! Quick!"

Then, cat-like, he twisted, swinging his legs up and through the gap in the masonry. His body arched—

catapulting out into space, hurtling groundward along the towering shaft's other face.

But as he plunged, he shifted the light-lance. Bracing it against his body, he gripped its head between his feet and triggered it on, full strength. Its broad force beam blazed forth, straight at the ground below.

Like a flexible, compressing shaft of radiant energy, it slowed his plunge. Balancing skillfully, he rode the beam on down.

**T**HE force of the landing made him wince. But at least, for the moment, he was free of the coleoptera, though even now he could hear the scurrying of their hairy feet in the dirt as they raced to head him off.

Whirling, he ran along the base of the shaft.

As he reached the corner, Kyla came stumbling toward him from the other side of the shaft, scrambling over the ruins, debris, in desperate haste. Two huge beetles, hot for the kill, bore down upon her from behind, closing the gap that separated them from her with every slithering step.

Haral drew back and whipped up the light-lance.

Running full tilt, the slim girl burst from the shadows, the coleoptera close at her heels.

Haral triggered the light-lance. Its beam slashed through the night. The foremost beetle drew into a with-

ing ball under its impact, rolling crazily through the rubble. The second fell back, its forelegs half burned off.

The blue man pivoted and ran after Kyla. Catching her by the arm, he half-dragged her with him towards the avenue.

Ahead, the ground leveled off. The broad expanse that had been the roadway spread before them.

Beyond it loomed the pylon.

Behind, the rustle of coleopteron wing-sheaths, the furious fluttering of the vestigial wings themselves, came loud as the rasp of branches in a storm-tossed forest, closer and closer.

Haral shoved the priestess on towards the roadway. Then, boldly, he turned and brought up the light-lance.

The coleoptera broke. Scrambling wildly, they rushed for cover.

"What, you *sabars*? You fear to meet my lance?" Haral shouted the words, even though he knew the beetles could not hear nor understand. Laughter boiled up in him—the ringing, defiant laughter that was not so much mirth as lust for battle.

But already the insects' Q-ray tubes were blinking. He had no choice but to wheel and again run after Kyla.

And as he ran, a new sound slashed through to him: the familiar keening blast of space-ship carrier craft lancing through the night.

Haral shot one swift glance up-

ward. He glimpsed slim, silvery streaks . . . streaks that were carriers in flight.

Sark's carriers—?

Haral cursed aloud. Panting, staggering with fatigue and the weight of his heavy copronium armor, he stumbled through the avenue's broken stone. Once he fell. But Kyla's ray-gun blazed above him, holding back the beetles till he could lurch up and wallow onward.

Then, at last, there was the pylon . . . the yawning entrance at its base.

"Hurry!" Kyla cried. "They gain upon us!"

A Q-ray sang its shining song of death too near at hand.

**T**HE blue man threw all his strength into one last effort. Together, he and the girl ran through the entry, into the blackness.

Haral turned. He laced his back-track with the light-lance's searing beam.

The beetles halted.

"This way," said Kyla. Her hand gripped Haral's. In silence, he followed her further and further into the pylon's pitchy depths.

Now they walked on a strange, entangling surface that crunched brittly beneath their feet.

Haral flicked on his lance's illumination cell just long enough to glimpse the scene about them.

A prickling ran up and down his spine. For they walked a corridor of death, a passage carpeted with bones . . . the bones of those who

once had ruled this mighty city. A thousand skulls stared up at them, a hollow-eyed horror. Skeletons spread in heaps and tangles, rising on all sides like some rank, evil fungus.

Kyla's voice came through the darkness: "You wonder why we hate all aliens, warrior? Once, a thousand years ago, this was our proudest *Shamon* city. Then the first ships came out of space to Ulna. They hurled down bombs, and my people sought to hide here from them. But gas came with the bombs—a heavy gas, and deadly. It seeped into these ancient tunnels, and those who survived the blasts, the radiation, died by thousands—yes, by millions . . ."

The girl's voice broke.

Her horror, her pain, pressed in on Haral. But he dared not let himself think of them.

He said sharply: "This is no time for talk! Any moment, the coleoptera may be upon us. Those ships that passed above us, too—they may have been Sark's. If Namboina's told where Xaymar lies, Sark's men may beat us to her. If we're to find her first, we must go quickly—"

"Yes, quickly!" Again Kyla's trembling hand seized his. She led the way down a long, steep ramp, then on through what seemed endless blackness. "The old books say these tunnels end beneath the Triad. And then, below that—there lies our sleeping goddess, Xaymar!"

On they toiled, and on. Twice, in

the ebon murk, they heard the muffled rattle of coleopteran mandibles. Once, the beetles' acrid stench rose rank and close into their nostrils.

"Pray to your gods, warrior, that they do not guess our goal in time to head us off," Kyla whispered hoarsely.

"Pray to your own, and my light-lance!" Haral answered harshly. He shifted, striving to ease the pain that still throbbed out from his wounded shoulder. Numbly, he wondered how much longer he could go on.

They came out of the tunnel, then, into a vast, echoing subterranean chamber.

"Now we must have light to find our way," the priestess said. "Already we are beneath the Triad."

Haral flicked on his lance's illumination cell.

THE room stretched as far as its beam would throw. Other tunnels debouched from the walls on every side.

"This way," said Kla. "Xaymar's shrine lies beneath the central staircase."

Together, they picked a path through more jumbled bones to the middle of the vast concourse, then descended down the stair they found there in spiral after spiral.

As they went down, the stink of the coleoptera grew steadily stronger.

"If this should be a trap—" Haral began.

"There is no other way," the

priestess answered.

The staircase ended in a circular room. High ledges lined its walls. In the center stood a great bronze ball, high as a tall man's head and set in a base of polished stone. Markings were etched upon it, markings that matched the configurations of this wild outlaw world of Ulna.

But slashing even deeper were other markings—the stylized images of the lightning that were Xaymar's symbol.

"A strong man can roll the globe within its base," Kyla told Haral. She studied the markings, chose a spot. "Here is the place. Now spin it upward."

New uneasiness came upon Haral. The muscles along the back of his neck felt stiff and drawn with tension.

He wondered if it could be his weariness, his wound.

But he could not shrug it off.

He said tightly. "This smells of danger, Kyla. There's trouble here."

Once more, he swept the lance's illumination beam across the room.

A long smear on the floor shimmered. Haral dropped to one knee, touched it. "Look! This is wet, and not with water! It's more like the blood of the coleoptera!"

A tremor ran through Kyla. "Then hurry! Quick! Spin the globe!"

The blue man straightened. Narrow-eyed, uneasy, he laid the lance aside. Then, bracing himself, he put his unwounded shoulder to the globe and heaved at it with all his might.

It moved a bare inch; then another.

He strained again.

Slowly, the great sphere turned. The edge of a slot cut in its under side came into view—a crack that widened as the globe rolled within the base, till an oblong orifice lay exposed like a tunnel mouth leading down into the footing.

Haral started to step back.

But, of a sudden, a faint sound came—the muffled ring of metal against stone.

Haral lunged for the light-lance.

But a harsh, unfamiliar voice slashed in upon him—a voice from atop the high, flat ledge that lined the walls: "Drop it, *chitza!* Drop the light-lance!"

From a different angle, another voice rang: "Quick! Drop it!"

A third: "Just one false move . . ."

An icy knot gathered in the pit of Haral's stomach. He let the lance fall.

TO his right, a *Pervod* rose into view upon the ledge, ray-gun murderously ready. A squat, tentacled Thorian appeared to his left. Sounds told him others were getting up behind him.

Desperately, he looked to Kyla.

But she stood rigid, fists clenched at her sides. The ray-pistol he'd given her had disappeared.

He turned back to the *Pervod*. "Well, finish it!" he cried. "You're here to burn us down. Get it done and be on your way!"

But the *Pervod* didn't answer.      into my hands!"

Instead, there was laughter . . .  
ghoulish, obscene laughter, laughter  
Haral had heard before.

A chill shook the blue man.

He wished he could be sure it  
was only his wound.

Again the laugh echoed; again. It  
came from the staircase, swelling  
louder and louder with each passing  
second.

And then, there were more *Per-  
vods*, more Thorians, more *Malyas*  
and Martians and mutants. There,  
too, was *Gar Sark's* famed Uranian  
riding-chair sweeping into view on  
its anti-gravitational direction beam.

There was Sark.

He leered at Haral. Never had  
the menace stood out in his fat face  
more sharply.

"Burn you down—?" He repeat-  
ed the blue man's words as if he  
knew their flavor. "No, no, you  
*starbo*. I'd not do that. Not now; not  
ever. It's far too quick a way for  
you to die."

"You'll do your worst, so do as  
you like." Haral forced himself to  
shrug despite the pain.

Sark smirked. "Of course. But  
first there's another task we must  
attend."

"Another task—?"

"Yes, now that you two have  
opened up the way." Sark chuckled,  
deep in his throat. His fat-rimmed  
eyes gleamed like tiny, vicious stars.  
"We go now to waken the living  
goddess, Xaymar, queen of storms,  
so that she can deliver her secret

## CHAPTER V.

**T**HERE lay the woman!

Xaymar. Woman and death,  
the end of a madman's quest.

The great crystal globe that cased  
her rested atop a dais in the center  
of an echoing, high-roofed chamber.  
Pulsing, aglow with strange life, its  
radiance fought back the crypt's im-  
pinging gloom.

Haral swayed for a moment under  
the impact of the sight, his wounds  
forgotten. Excitement raced through  
him.

But Sark's men held him by either  
arm, and others penned him in front  
and behind, and Sark himself sat in  
the riding-chair mere feet away, his  
hand never straying from the cymo-  
synthesizer switch.

And there was Kyla, pale and for-  
lorn, in a Thorian's tentacled grasp.

The end of a quest, indeed. The  
bitter end.

Sickness came to Haral.

Yet because he was the man he  
was, such a mood could not last long  
even here, even now. Thoughtfully,  
he gazed about—taking in the vault-  
ed roof; the walls, honeycombed  
with coleopteran burrows; the ex-  
pressions with which Sark's mongrel  
crewmen tried to mask their awe.

Above all, he looked upon the  
woman.

Sark's eyes, too, were gleaming.  
Drawn as by some mighty lodestone,  
he sent his riding-chair scudding for-

ward to the dais on which the globe encasing the sleeping goddess rested. His web-fingered hand reached out to touch the crystal.

Then, abruptly, he halted. Slowly, he withdrew his hand and wheeled the chair about. His eyes sought Haral, and his lips parted in a leer.

He said: "Ulna has little love for strangers, *chitza*."

Haral said nothing.

"Perhaps they thought to trap a few with this pretty bauble," the raider chief remarked. His smile was sinister. "Perhaps Namboina told the things he told too easily, in order that he might laugh in hell because I, too, had died."

Haral shrugged. "You talk in circles, *starbo*."

"You came here seeking to waken Xaymar, did you not?" Sark smirked. "I merely meant that you should have the chance to do it."

His smile vanished. His words crackled: "Go to the dais, *chitza!* Awaken Xaymar!"

Haral's captors shoved him forward. Numbly, he clumped across the floor.

SARK and his men drew back to the protection of the archway. Kyla stood in the shadows, pressed against a wall.

For the fraction of a second, the blue man thought of calling out to her to draw the ray-gun she'd hidden in her garments, and blast the raiders with it.

But the fascination that lay in the

sleeping goddess pulled even stronger.

He ran his tongue along dry lips. It could be as Sark had guessed—that this was a trap for the unwary; that the first time he touched the bubble would also be the last.

Yet still he stepped onto the dais. Then, breathing deep, he wiped a window through the dust that shrouded the shining globe.

Nothing happened.

A mass of valves and tubes and coils of unfamiliar pattern were mounted high inside the bubble. To one side, a cord like a bell-pull hung nearly to the floor.

But Haral gave the equipment scant heed. He had eyes only for the woman known as Xaymar.

Her body gleamed smooth and sleek in this eerie light—voluptuous, lithe-limbed, perfect. Motionless, naked save for the short, jeweled veil that masked the top half of her face against a nimbus of jet-black hair, she lay like some lovely manikin, frozen in a sleep as deep as death itself. Yet, somehow, there was a warmth and texture to her skin that seemed to reach out even through the crystal; a melding of curves and hollows that cried out that once she, too, had been alive.

*And might still live!*

The blue man sucked in air. Pivoting, he studied the panel set in the great globe's base.

The switch was there, just as Kyla had described it.

And the secret prayer, the call

to waken—?

Only the soul of dead Namboina could chant it now.

Haral clutched the lever. Then, stiff with tension, he jammed it shut.

Seconds crept by on leaden feet. He felt a lone drop of icy sweat slide down his spine.

Then, inside the bubble, greenish mist began to rise. It filled the crystal casing. Eddying, swirling, it thickened till the woman's recumbent form grew dim and blurred.

In the vibrant stillness, Haral could hear his own heart beat.

Slowly, the mist within the great globe thinned again. A tube set high above the woman flashed on. Waves of pale violet light washed over her smooth, nude, perfect body.

In spite of himself, Haral's tension soared.

Now—abruptly, without warning—a wild, shrill, keening sound rose thinly. A new light blazed above the woman. Like lightning striking, a shining, silvery beam lanced down out of a queerly-shaped projector.

A sheet of crackling silver flame encased the woman. Her body went suddenly rigid. She jerked spasmodically, lifting half clear of her cot in a writhing, twisting arch.

Then, sharply, light and sound cut off again.

The woman fell back limply and lay still.

It dawned on Haral that his nails were rasping against the crystal.

Through an interminable moment,

the woman within sagged inert as any corpse. Then, almost imperceptibly, her lips quivered. The bare breasts stirred as she drew a shallow, sobbing breath.

In the same instant, it seemed to Haral that he could see her lids open beneath the veil. But he could not be sure.

She tried to lift herself; fell back.

Fiercely, Haral slashed at the crystal with his elbow.

The heavy copronium elbow-piece of his armor tore through the globe—puncturing, not shattering. Haral stabbed at the bubble again, and it ripped, in the manner of some flexible, transparent plastic. Forcing a hand into the gash, the blue man tore a great chunk loose, clear to the floor; then another.

Stepping inside, he bent over the woman—gripping her shoulders; straining for her whisper.

"Quick! The flagon—!" Her hand stretched out in a feeble gesture.

Haral followed the movement to a holder beside the cot. It held a flask. Snatching up the container, he tore away the seal, then lifted and held the woman while she drank in great, greedy gulps.

When at last the flask was empty, she sank back once more. But now color was flowing to her face. Her breathing steadily grew deeper and more regular.

Haral let his weight rest on the edge of the cot. Very gently, he reached to lift the goddess' veil.

Spasmodically, her hands came

up. "No—!" Nails dug into his wrist.

He started at the tempestuous violence of her; the sudden strength. Then, wearily, he drew back his hand.

In the same instant Sark's voice lanced in: "Leave her alone, *chitza!*"

Haral turned.

**T**HE raider chief and his men were back, now. They poured into the crypt in a rush. Sark himself swept toward the dais in his riding-chair as on the crest of a wave, ahead of all the others. His thick lips were working, his eyes hot with excitement.

But his fingers never left the cy-mosynthesizer switch.

Haral clenched his fist in frustrated fury. Of a sudden his wounds, his weariness, hung heavy on him.

He glimpsed Kyla. Hesitantly, she, too, was coming towards the goddess. Her lips were parted as if to cry out in protest against this whole bizarre affair. Deep lines of strain marred the pale loveliness of her face.

Sark cried: "Back, *chitza!* Stand clear of Xaymar!"

For an instant Haral stiffened. Then, painfully, he forced himself to his feet.

But now a new voice interrupted, imperious and vibrant:

"Who are you to give commands, fat beast, here in the innermost sanctuary of Xaymar, queen of storms?"

Haral pivoted.

The woman on the cot now sat erect, her very stance a mirror of haughtiness and pride.

Anger flamed in Sark's puffy cheeks. "Who dares to question? I am Sark—"

"Yes. He is Sark," Haral cut in. He poured savage irony into his words. "They say you are a goddess, Xaymar. But he—he is Sark, *gar* of the space-raiders, a being so fierce and brave he does not even dare to waken you himself!"

"Silence, *chitza!*" shrieked the raider chief.

Haral mocked him: "He seeks your secrets, Xaymar—if he can pay the price with someone else's life, and not his own! As for commands—what does he care that others call you goddess? He is the great *Gar* Sark—"

Sark cried: "Kill the *starbo!*"

Now, for the first time, the woman men knew as Xaymar gave the gross raider heed. Twisting, she faced him. Her hand touched the cord that hung down beside the cot on which she rested, and even that simple gesture was somehow pregnant with a nameless menace that halted Sark and his crewmen in their tracks.

In a voice suddenly cold as Pluto's ice-things, she said, "If he dies, creature, you die with him!"

**F**OR an instant there was a silence that echoed vibrant tension. Then, calmly, Xaymar turned again



to Haral. "And you, blue one—?" she queried. "What of you? Why do you seek me?"

Haral let her words hang for a moment. He looked out across the crypt . . . past Sark, the crewmen, Kyla . . .

Kyla. She, too, rode with destiny; but it was a different destiny than his, a destiny that tolled her doom already. The lines that etched her face seemed even deeper now, set off by the contrast with the shimmering spun gold of her hair. There was more than beauty in her. There was spirit, also, born of stark courage, and all at once the very sight of her brought a poignancy that stabbed him like a knife.

But he pushed it back, and let his laugh ring out. "I seek the only thing in the void worth seeking!" he slashed recklessly. "I seek power, Xaymar—the power to fulfill my destiny and carve an empire. But I never thought to find the key to it locked in the brain of a woman as beautiful as you, or I'd have sought it sooner!"

Xaymar's ripe lips parted. "Your tongue is skilled, blue man! It alone should carry you to your empire!"

"But does that skilled tongue have truth, too, my goddess? Or is it so practiced that now it lies by instinct?" It was Kyla who lashed out, from a place close by the dais. Passion had brought hot color to her cheeks.

"They lie, my goddess! All these aliens lie!" she rushed on fiercely.

"Hate and greed are the only creed they know." Already Ulna lies drenched in the blood they've shed—the blood of your followers, ground down by these monsters to slaves or less. Now, still thirsting for more wealth, more power, they seek you, too, my goddess! They would make you their slave—tear your secrets from you, that they may use the power that lies within the lightning to reach out across the void for yet more worlds to conquer—"

The woman who was the living goddess Xaymar, queen of storms, stared coolly down at her slim young priestess, Kyla.

"You are of the *Shamon*, are you not?" she interrupted, and open condescension was in her tone.

"Yes, my goddess—"

"A race of stuffy fools, the *Shamon*."

"My goddess—!"

"You prove my point. Who but a race of stuffy fools would try to pass off a sleeping woman as a goddess? That is, unless they were knaves, instead, seeking some gain by their deception."

"But these aliens would destroy us—"

"And why not, if the best you can do is pray to me for succor? The blue one spoke true. Power is the only thing in all the void worth seeking—for without it, man and race alike are doomed!"

**K**YLA stood very still. But, watching her, Haral could see

her lips begin to tremble. The color was draining from her face again. Her features had taken on a stiff, unnatural set.

"Then . . . Xaymar, queen of storms, deserts her faithful ones for aliens? She casts off my *Shamon* people . . . me, her priestess—?"

Xaymar tossed her head. "I tire of this dreary prattle!" she cried, and gestured to a massive, tentacled Thorian at Sark's side. "You! Take this *Shamon* drab away!"

For the fraction of a second the Thorian's great saucer eyes rolled from Xaymar to Sark to Kyla. Then, wordless, he undulated towards the shrinking girl.

And Haral, too, stared, still not quite believing that this incredible creature, be she woman or devil or goddess, could so take command even of Sark's own men.

Then, again, he glimpsed the stiffness in Kyla's face, and a strange uneasiness gripped him. Perhaps it was the way she stood, almost as if waiting for the Thorian, with no thought of retreating.

The Thorian whipped a tentacle towards her.

But in the same instant Kyla, too, was moving. Her hair shimmered like quicksilver as she slid beneath the Thorian's snake-like member. Her hand darted beneath her filmy outer garment, then out again, jerking forth her ray-gun. Her body twisted as she stabbed the weapon close to the Thorian's monstrous bulk.

Then she was blasting, at so short a range that the raider's flesh burst asunder under the impact of the beam.

The Thorian's tentacles lashed out in frenzy. But already the girl was leaping back beyond his grasp.

Now, she was turning; springing up onto the dais. Her voice rang with a fury born of outrage:

"Die, traitor! Die for the *Shamon* and for Ulna!"

She blazed a ray straight for Xaymar's naked body.

Haral threw himself forward, between the two women. Desperately, he tried to knock Kyla's ray-gun up with one hand while he swept Xaymar from her cot with the other.

But his wound-stiffened shoulder caught. The ray-gun's energy bolt burst on his own chest-plate. Its impact smashed him down. For a split second he saw the crypt as a blazing kaleidoscope of action, a maelstrom swirling in on a pain-racked vortex that was his brain. He caught the madness in Kyla's eyes; the sudden panic in the way that Xaymar fell. Beyond them, the space-raiders' faces merged in a weird blurred jumble.

Then Sark was roaring, "Now! Now! Seize them—!"

Frantically, Haral tried to tear clear of pain and shock and debris.

But before he could move, Xaymar caught the cord that hung beside her. Spasmodically, she jerked it down.

He knew, somehow, that it was

an alarm, even though the sound of its signal was pitched too high and thin for human ears.

The sight that followed was one of the strangest he had ever seen.

**F**OR out of the thousands of coleopteran burrows that pock-marked the walls of this hidden crypt, a horde came leaping — a horde of great scarlet beetles that hurtled down upon Sark and his raiders before they could so much as turn. A living wave, they burst over the crewmen and the dais—clutching the aliens, bearing them down; yet holding them, not killing.

Haral found himself flat on his back, pinned there by two monstrous coleoptera. Kyla, too, lay prone, shaking under the touch of another of the beetles.

Haral twisted, looking for Xaymar.

Alone out of all the throng, she stood erect, untouched. A horde of the coleoptera had grouped themselves about her. Now they bent low in weird attitudes of genuflection.

The woman waved them back with a quick, impatient gesture. Swiftly, she picked her way to Haral.

The beetles that held him gave way before her. Gripping the blue man's hand, she helped him to his feet.

"You see, warrior—?" She lifted her hand in a sweeping, all-inclusive gesture. "I know what power means

—a power greater than any the void has ever seen. I, too, have carved an empire: the empire of these silent ones, the coleoptera. To them, I am truly goddess. They are mine to command."

Haral swayed a little. Tiny waves of nausea washed over him, rising like vapors out of the pain flowing from his wound. With a sort of dull detachment, he observed that blood had begun to drip from his left hand's fingers once again.

A trifle thickly, he said, "I hear your words. But what good is your beetle empire? Where can it lead you? How far can you go?"

The woman called Xaymar smiled a smile that was old when this outlaw world was young. "Did you not say I held the key to your fate, blue one? The coleoptera are my workers and my warriors. Because I saw the role that they might play, I helped them gain the power of thought; so now they help me turn my dreams to destiny."

"Dreams?" Haral muttered. "Dreams indeed! They say you've lain here sleeping a thousand years."

Xaymar laughed softly, tauntingly. "And why do you suppose I slept so long, blue warrior? Believe me, it was not out of boredom. No; I, too, like you, reached out for power. But first I had to fill my legion's ranks. I needed time for my coleoptera to breed and multiply, in preparation for my day of conquest . . ."

She paused, and the jewels with which her veil was set seemed to

gleam so bright that Haral closed his eyes against them. Once again the air of nameless menace he'd felt before crept through the crypt.

Kaymar's voice came as from afar: "We shall ride together, warrior, you and I! You've saved my life, and you have a will that matches mine. I've longed this thousand years and more for a man like you to share my dreams . . ."

The words went on and on, but Haral could no longer hear. The sickness in him grew. He knew of a sudden that he was going to fall.

Words and more words—an incoherent jumble. He was toppling now, yet there was nothing he could do to stop it. In great, languorous spirals, the floor of the dais was roaring up into his eyes.

But as it approached, somehow, it grew dimmer . . . dimmer . . . dimmer . . .

Then new words came. Or, rather, old words, thundering out of the black sack of his memory.

Kyla's words:

*"Each night she took a different lover—and then, at the dawn, at her command, each one was slain!"*

The blackness closed in . . .

## CHAPTER VI

**H**ARAL woke in the glow of a wondrous iridescent warmth that pulsed through every nerve and fiber of his body. The pain and weariness were gone. Surging strength, new vigor, flooded through

him.

Slowly, still not quite believing his own senses, he opened his eyes.

He discovered that the iridescence was no mere metaphor, no figment of his imagination. For he lay in what seemed a boundless sphere of light that painted his naked body with an interweaving, continually changing tapestry of glowing color.

He would have reached up to touch the wound in his shoulder, then, but when he tried, he found he could not move; that his whole body was somehow gripped in invisible bonds of force that held and molded him at will. They twisted him, turned him, flexed and stretched his muscles. Apparently without support, he moved through space and time—now flat on his back; now curled first on one side and then the other; now upright, upside down, cramped or contorted into an infinity of positions.

When his head rotated as under the pressure of unseen fingers, he at last glimpsed his shoulder. With a shock, he saw it had grown well and whole. No wound was visible, no scar apparent.

The blue man relaxed, content to bask unresisting in this wondrous healing bath of radiant energy.

Then, slowly, the radiance dimmed. Haral felt himself sinking gently. His back brushed what might have been resilient fabric, and he came to rest. The last of the light had faded. He lay in utter darkness.

Xaymar's voice reached out of the blackness close at hand: "Is the pain gone from your body, warrior?"

"Yes. All gone."

"Yet this unit that gives out life and strength is but one of the least of all my secrets!" The voice of the woman-goddess took on a deeper, more vibrant timbre. "There are so many things I know—so many secrets of life and death— But come! You shall see them with me!"

A switch clicked as she spoke. Light came—a strange, halo-like glow without visible source, utterly unlike the shimmering radiance that had gone before. It formed a lambent wall against the blackness.

Haral sat up. He found himself on a cot much like the one on which the queen of storms herself had lain, back in the crypt.

She was here beside him now, her lips curved in a smile of welcome below the veil. She wore a close-fitting, high-necked garment of some unique material that matched the glistening blue-black of her hair. Yet, though the raiment masked her body's ripe curves with fabric, the overall effect became one of accent rather than concealment.

It made Haral suddenly conscious of his own nude frame. He shifted.

Xaymar laughed. "There's a cloak on the rack beneath your cot, my blue one." She turned. "Follow me."

The note of mockery in her tone

jabbed at Haral beyond all reason. But he swept the cloak about him with one swift, incisive movement and fell in beside the woman.

He wondered where this road would take him. Whether it led to destiny . . . or death.

Instinctively, at the thought, he shot a narrow-eyed glance at Xaymar, and his blood quickened. The momentary irritation fell away. Perhaps even death would not be too high a price to pay for a night as this strange creature's lover.

But why a single night? Why did she kill when the new day came?

Above all, why did she wear that weird jeweled veil?

For the moment, at least, he could not hope for answers. Shrugging, he turned his attention elsewhere.

The light was moving with them as they walked, like a torch afloat in an encroaching sea of blackness. The echo of their footsteps told the blue man that they must be in some vast, high-ceilinged chamber — a cave, a hall.

Yet they stood alone. There was no sign of life about them.

Haral said: "What happened to the others?"

"The . . . others—?" Xaymar's voice held a curious note of hesitation.

"Sark and his men. The priestess, Kyla."

It was the woman's turn to shrug. "I let Sark go, on his promise that he'd blast off within the hour he reached his ships."

"You let him go—?" Haral stared. His tension and temper soared. "Are you mad, woman? Sark's word's worth nothing. He'll blast off, yes—but only to roar down on you here and smash you!"

**X**AYMAR stopped short. Before Haral realized what she was doing, she lashed a slap out at him. Fire flashed through his face beneath her fingers. "Have a care who you call mad, blue warrior!" she cried in fury. "Men have died for less—as you can die—"

The sight of her anger lit a spark within Haral. Of a sudden he did not care whether this was death or destiny. Before she could escape, he caught the hand with which she'd slapped him and jerked her to him.

"The blood runs hot in others' veins as well as yours," he rasped out tightly. "You've gone too long with your arrogance unchallenged. But I'm the man to break that habit."

Her nails raked bloody paths along his sides. Her feet beat at his shinbones.

Haral cursed her — and then, bringing her face to his by sheer brute strength, he kissed her.

Her body went limp against him. Her bruised lips welcomed his.

He breathed deep; straightened. "And now—we'll see what's hidden beneath that veil!"

Her body went rigid again. She twisted as he clutched for the jeweled mask. "No, blue man—"

He caught the veil and ripped it off.

In the same instant, before he could see her face, the light snapped out.

They stood there in the darkness, then, adventurer and goddess, bodies tight together, the silence broken only by the hoarse rasp of their breathing.

Then Haral said, "I can wait as long as you can, Xaymar."

She laughed softly. "You leave no doubt about your daring, do you, warrior? Nor am I even angry with you for it. I like a man with the strength to take what he desires. But not quite yet. You'll have to wait a little while."

"Then you'll wait, too—till the light goes on again."

"Must I?" The mocking note crept back into her tone. "Don't press the gods of chance too far . . ."

"You'll wait," Haral said.

As he spoke, he felt something touch his backbone a little above his waist.

The next second two great claws clutched him just below the ribs.

He stiffened.

Xaymar laughed again. "We'll wait!" she mocked him. "We'll wait till the light goes on—or a coleopteron rips out your backbone!"

Haral stood motionless. His hands all at once were slick with sweat.

Xaymar's ripe body came full against him. Her hands touched his face, pulled his lips down to hers. Then—fiercely, brutally—as he had

kissed her, she kissed him.

Her words came, a vibrant whisper: "You are the one who's mad, blue man! But it is a madness that can lead you to your own dark destiny—if you live!"

She twisted free.

**T**HERE was a moment of black silence. Then the light snapped on. Once more the veil masked Xaymar's face as it had before.

The mandibles let go of Haral. Stiffly, he looked around.

Half a dozen of the great scarlet beetles stood within the lighted circle, watching him with cold, multifaceted insectile eyes.

He shuddered.

As if there had been no interruption, Xaymar said: "You wonder why I let Sark go. But I had no choice. He told of a thing called a cymosynthesizer with which he could destroy our planetoid of Ulna."

"And if he lied—?"

"He did not. I looked into his brain and saw he spoke the truth as best he knew it."

"You . . . looked into his brain?"

"I have that power." Xaymar's smile was cryptic, whether with dark mirth or ancient wisdom Haral could not say. "Thoughts to me are things to grasp like tools or weapons. When I focus my brain I can turn another mind inside out and drain it dry."

An uneasiness chilled Haral's spine. "You speak in jest . . ."

"You mean—you wish I did?"

The woman laughed aloud, and the light glinted in her hair as on dark waters. "In jest, then—I looked into Sark's brain, and when I saw the things I saw, I turned him and his crewmen free."

Haral grimaced. "And he'll come back."

"Of course. I saw that, too. But I do not care." Again Xaymar smiled her cryptic smile. "Now, come! You shall see why I await him without fear!"

They walked on again. Then, at last, there was a door ahead and, beyond it, a long, dark passageway.

Haral frowned as he strode through the murk beside the woman. Once more, as he had a dozen times before, he thought of Kyla, with her dreams and rippling golden hair and slim young body. She was so different from this dark voluptuary who was a living goddess. Yet she, too, had shared the dangers of this adventure with him.

What had happened to her? He wondered. But something told him to make no query.

Another door loomed. Xaymar cried, "Behold my warriors!"

She flung the portal wide.

Haral stared.

For here were no coleoptera. Here lay what appeared to be a mausoleum, instead—another vast, echoing chamber, dim-lighted and stretching out as far as the eye could see, with banked, sealed crypts rising row on row from floor to ceiling, like some monstrous, many-celled honeycomb.

Xaymar asked: "Now do you see why I slept so willingly for a thousand years, my warrior? In each cell here is sealed an egg, preserved secure from harm and the ravages of time. From each egg, when the time to strike has come, will spring one of my fighting coleoptera—"

She broke off; hurried the blue man up a ramp to another level.

Here were stacked Q-ray tubes, light-guns, and blasters, piled high in bins by millions upon millions.

"Come! There is still more!"

They climbed another ramp.

At the top, before a heavy door, a huge coleopteron waited.

THE woman who was the living goddess Xaymar paused, head tilted. It was as if she were listening to some silent message. Then she turned, half towards Haral, and her lips curved in a strange smile that was somehow infinitely evil. She spoke no word, but even the blue man could feel the hammering, affirmative impact of her thought-waves: "Yes . . . yes . . . yes . . ."

The great scarlet beetle moved swiftly off down another corridor.

Xaymar moved close to the door. Like magic, it opened before her.

She said: "Beyond this door, no being but me has ever gone, blue warrior! But now you, too, shall enter!"

Haral followed her across the threshold.

The door swung shut behind them.

The room in which they stood was cramped and box-like, with walls and floor and ceiling of dully gleaming metal. As the portal closed, a feeling of motion pulled at Haral's vitals. It dawned on him that they had entered some sort of carrier that even now was hurtling them upward with the speed of lightning.

Then the feeling left him. The door opened once more, and they stepped out into the hot yellow light of an Ulnese day.

Shielding his eyes against the sudden glare, Haral looked about.

Above them rose a gigantic crystal bubble, a dozen times as large as the one beneath which Xaymar had lain sleeping. Set high amid craggy grey and green and purple peaks, it thrust up like a beacon, a watchtower, into the yellow sky. Concentric circular tracks on which were mounted banks of strange, snub-nosed projectors, each set at a different angle, ran round the globe above his head. Control boards, a mass of indicator dials and switches, were set at intervals along the metal-walled, chest-high base.

Xaymar touched his arm. "Your trappings, blue man . . ."

He turned to her gesture. There, stacked in a niche beside the shaft up which they'd come, lay his light-lance, his armor, the clothes he'd worn.

"Your steed, too . . ." The woman pointed through the crystal, down the slope.

Haral stared. His great blue Mer-



curian *hwalon* dragon moved restlessly to and fro in a narrow natural yard bounded on three sides by steep rock walls less than half an Earth mile from them. Two coleoptera stood guard along the open side.

Narrow-eyed, Haral turned back to the woman. "But why? What made you bring my gear here, and my *hwalon*?"

"Is it not plain?" shrugged Xaymar. "You are a warrior, and I have need of such to lead my beetle hordes to battle."

"To battle—?"

"My day has come. In a little while I shall reach out and seize all Ulna. You know the ways of the aliens who now hold it, so you shall be in the van of my advancing legions. You'll show them when and where to strike: how best to meet the alien weapons."

**H**ARAL tried to probe the blankness that was her veil; to fathom the mind of this strange woman who hid her beauty behind its jewel-sprayed folds.

At last he said: "You've picked the wrong man, Xaymar. I'm a warrior, yes—but not such a fool that I'll try to lead your ground-bound hordes out to battle against space ships. The wars of the void are fought in the air, not down in the muck and mire of a pygmy planetoid. Sark would butcher your beetles from above before they'd marched a mile."

Xaymar's lips curved. The clash

of cymbals, of swords and shields, was in her laugh.

"This one war will be different, blue man! We'll fight to seize and hold the ground till Ulna's taken. Then will be time enough to talk of ships that slash across the void, and battles for planets fought in deep space."

"But Sark's fleet—"

"Sark will have no fleet!" the woman slashed back fiercely. Her whole body swayed, and even here, in the full light of the blazing yellow sky, her hair showed black as a Martian *koboc's* sinister hood. "You came here seeking my secret, warrior. I mean that you—"

Close at hand, a bell rang shrilly.

Xaymar halted in mid-sentence. Whirling, she flicked a switch on the nearest of the control boards.

A plate like that of a visiscreen flashed on. Swiftly, the woman adjusted dials.

Blurs on the plate resolved into a horde of rising silver ships. Like screaming meteors, they lanced into the sky.

"Sark's ships?" the woman who was a fleshly goddess asked Haral coolly.

He nodded. "Yes. Carriers. Light craft, small and slow enough to fight close-in on a world the size of Ulna."

"But not all Sark's fleet?"

"No. His great raiders would have no room here to maneuver."

"Then Sark himself still lingers at the spaceport, waiting to see how

I'll meet this latest challenge."

"What—?"

Xaymar laughed. "He fears me, blue man. I read it in his brain as he sat there in my crypt. And I learned more: this weapon of his you call a cymosynthesizer is useless once he's in the air. So he'll leave it on the ground and then stay with it for the sake of the protection that it offers, instead of risking his own fat neck in one of the ships he sends against me."

**T**HE ships on the screen were looming ever larger now. Streaks of silver light set against dullness, they hurtled closer . . . closer . . .

Forcing casualness into his voice, Haral gestured to them. "And what will you do when at last they reach us?" He touched what appeared to be some sort of triangulation finder. "At the rate they're moving, they should be here within another minute."

Turning, not answering, Xaymar stepped to a huge switch-box set in the center of the bubble's floor and threw a lever. An eerie, whining sound rose, and with it a faint smell of ozone.

The woman threw a second lever. A third. A fourth.

The whining grew louder, the odor stronger.

Xaymar moved back to the control board. Almost idly, she said: "They call me queen of storms."

Haral stayed silent. But of a sud-

den his heart was pounding.

"Do you know the power of the lightning, blue man? Can you vision the force that lies locked within it?"

The whining continued to rise. It was almost a thin scream now.

Still Haral waited, wordless.

Xaymar twisted dials again. The warrior saw that her knuckles showed white through the skin. Her voice took on new intensity, new vibrance:

"You dream of power, blue man—but never can you have imagined power such as this!" She laughed, a little wildly. "I cannot pretend to explain these things so you can understand them. But a thousand years ago I learned how to create what I choose to call an ionic vacuum—an electrolytic vortex that sucks in electrons from the atmosphere's neutral atoms. The very process sets up a storm condition. Wind, rain, turbulence—they all come with it."

Like an echo to her words, a shadow fell across the inverted crystal bowl in which they stood.

Incredulously, Haral shot a fast glance skyward. An icy knot took form deep in his midriff.

Where mere seconds before he had gazed up into the bright, clear yellow of the Ulnese day, now clouds were swirling! Before his very eyes, they grew and darkened.

Through his haze of shock, Xaymar's words came dimly:

"A storm is a dynamo, blue one—a dynamo greater than it lies within man's power even to conceive!

It generates the lightning. Mighty bolts crash from it down to earth—spent, wasted. But these projectors,”—she gestured to the massed banks that lined the tracks overhead—“these projectors can direct its fury! They focus its shafts, throw out magnetic targets for it . . .”

**N**OW the whole sky above them had grown dark. For as far as Haral could see, the storm clouds gathered. The roar of thunder drowned out the shrilly keening whine that filled his tortured ears. Lightning leaped in blinding sheets and chains and flashes.

With an effort, the blue man tore his eyes from the violence overhead and looked again to the viewer plate by the control board.

It blazed with the glint of Sark's carrier ships. A rushing silver wall of death, they hurtled ever nearer.

“Twenty seconds more!” Xaymar cried into his ear. “Twenty seconds—and they perish!”

The hurtling ships overflowed the screen. Hulls blotted out the sky.

“Ten seconds!”

The plate blurred, out of focus.

“Look! They come!” shrieked Xaymar, and there was a vindictive triumph in her scream that whispered of something close to madness.

Haral followed her sweeping gesture—up, to the sky itself, and the rocket-borne death that dwelt there.

There were Sark's ships—a fleet, a horde. Now they lanced downward on their final strike. The rear of

their rockets slashed through the storm.

In spite of himself, Haral felt the clutch of fear.

Overhead, the projector banks were tracking. The lightning was a blinding, continuous flash.

“Is it power you want?” screamed Xaymar madly. “I'll show you power, blue warrior!”

Her hand darted out and pressed a button.

The heavens exploded.

Desperately, Haral kept his eyes on the raider fleet. Through the blaze and glare, he saw great, jagged bolts spear down upon it. Some ships were split, some torn asunder. A hundred smashed themselves to atoms on the cruel crags of the mountains.

Others simply disappeared in mid-air.

In ten seconds not one was left still in the sky.

Haral sagged limp against an upright.

How many battles had he seen across the void? How many ships gone down in blood and flame?

But beside this, all the rest were nothing. Where they left off, this cataclysmic holocaust began.

**I**T was the answer to his dream of power, his pact with destiny. Given this weapon—yes, this weapon only—the universe was his!

He swayed in the grip of his mad ambition. His heart was a driving, hammering piston.

Xaymar said: "Throw the switches, blue one. Let the storm pass."

Numbly, Haral stepped to the box and slammed down the four heavy levers.

The whining died away. The smell of ozone faded.

The woman came close to him. "We shall rule the universe together, warrior . . ."

He looked at her . . . at raven hair and ripe, half-parted lips and slender fingers . . . the temptation, incarnate, that lay in her perfect body.

She whispered: "Kiss me, warrior!"

A tremor ran through him. He pulled her to him.

Her head went back. Her lips were trembling.

Breathing deep, Haral kissed her. The softness of her mouth made him a little giddy. Her lips clung to his. He could feel her arms about him, the pressure of her breasts against him.

But the jewels in her veil gouged his cheek.

What did that bizarre mask hide? And there were Kyla's words again:

*"Each night she took a different lover—and then, at the dawn, at her command, each one was slain!"*

He lifted his head, then, and the living goddess whom men called Xaymar laughed softly, still in his arms.

"How many men have sought my kisses, warrior? Yet I ask you to

claim them!"

Haral did not speak.

Her midnight hair brushed his face. "There will be nights without number, blue one — nights when you'll forget even your ambition in my arms!"

"Yes."

She drew back a fraction. "Why, then, are you so silent? Am I not beautiful? Can you not feel the warm fire I promise you?" Her voice took on a sudden edge. "Or—is it that you would rather hold that blonde *Shamon tirot* they call Kyla in your arms?"

With an effort, Haral held his face immobile. "Now you speak as a woman, not a goddess. Kyla was your priestess. I sought her only to guide me to you."

Xaymar pushed back from him. "Have a care how you lie to me, blue man! I looked into your mind while you lay unconscious. She was there, that Kyla! Your first thoughts were of her!"

**H**ARAL let his words go harsh and angry: "You still talk like a jealous woman! She gave me only trouble. I care nothing for her."

"Trouble? That was all she gave you?" Xaymar taunted. Her lips twisted. "Then you'll be happy to hear what I've done with her, warrior!"

"What you've done—?" Haral's words came blurted. In spite of himself, tension rolled up within him. "What do you mean? Where is she?"

"You'll laugh with me, blue man! She tried to kill me, yet I was merciful, as a goddess should be. Instead of tearing her heart out, I freed her, and found a mate to woo her."

"A mate—?"

"A mate fit for her kind of *tirot*."

Xaymar laughed, and of a sudden the spell of nameless menace and infinite evil Haral had caught before rang in the sound. "I gave her to Sark."

"Sark—!" Haral reeled.

"Yes, Sark." The woman moved back one sinuous step, then another, like a great cat toying with its prey. "He asked that I let him take her away from Ulna with him. I said no. But then, later, it came to me that I could devise no greater suffering for her, so I sent her to him."

"You . . . sent her to that creature?"

"Yes. Already she's on her way there." A fiend would have envied Xaymar's smile. "That was why the coleopteron was waiting for me at the shaft below here. He sought my last decision—and I said, 'Yes. Good riddance. Let Sark have her.'"

Through a scarlet haze, Haral cried out, "Curse you, Xaymar!"

He was moving forward in the same instant, lashing out at her, and he saw her mouth go slack with shock at his sudden onslaught.

Then his fist hammered home on her jaw: The force of it lifted her and slammed her back across the bubble, to land in a heap on the

floor, crumpled and unconscious.

Then the haze cleared. Numbly, Haral stared down at her.

Why had he done it? What did he care whether Sark got Kyla? He'd meant it when he said she'd given him naught but trouble. His destiny lay here—here, with Xaymar, queen of storms; here, with the secrets that would give him the power to carve out his dream empire. This other was sheer madness—without sense or logic; without even volition.

Yet he'd done it.

And now—?

Already, out there in the green-grey-purple Ulnese mountains, a slim *Shamon* girl was being dragged to a monster.

Almost without thinking, he looked to his armor.

He was half-way down the slope to his *hwalon* before it dawned on him that, with Xaymar unconscious and at his mercy, he'd still forgotten even to look beneath her veil.

## CHAPTER VII

**B**LEAKLY, Haral looked down on the knot of coleoptera moving through the valley below.

There could be no mistake. This was the party. Even from here, sitting his *hwalon* high amid the barren crags above them, he could glimpse the shimmering gold of the captive Kyla's hair.

He pondered. Nearly a dozen of the giant beetles were in the party, guarding the girl on all sides.

Further, considering their mastery of mind-to-mind communication, it seemed impossible that they had not heard by now of his escape and mission.

Almost affectionately, he touched his own worn helmet. With it to insulate his brain, at least he had little to fear from the weird mind control that was their deadliest weapon.

As for the odds, what real difference did it make whether they were a dozen to one against him, or a hundred? From any angle, his course was madness, and no calculation could make it otherwise. He'd thrown out logic when he struck Xaymar down and blasted the two beetles on guard over his *hwalon*. Now his fate lay with the gods of the void and his own right arm.

Laughing harshly, he wheeled the dragon. Then, light-lance raised and ready, he moved on down the rock-strewn defile for a closer survey of the situation.

When he came out of the gorge, he'd quartered the distance between him and his quarry. Thoughtful, narrow-eyed, he studied the group in more detail from the cover of a boulder.

But the coleoptera were obviously on guard. Two ranged ahead as scouts. Another pair closed up the rear, while one held to either side of the procession's line of march as outriders. The rest of the party stayed close-grouped about the girl.

Again the blue man checked the

rugged terrain, searching for some accident of ground that would give him the chance he needed.

Ahead, the valley narrowed sharply, then divided. One of the two spurs, that on the left, was cramped and tortuous, a cleft-like gully. The other, smoother and wider, had walls so steep that it could not but force in the beetles covering the company's flanks.

Haral breathed a fraction faster. Spurring the *hwalon* forward, following the high ground and taking advantage of every rise and rift and clump of cover, he headed full-tilt for the narrow left spur of the divided valley, racing to reach it ahead of the coleoptera.

**H**IS mount strained to the task. Clawing through broken stone, around boulders, up a dozen near-sheer rock faces, it matched the pace of the beetles as they hurried along the infinitely smoother road that was the valley. Then, slowly, it began to pull ahead. Rear guard, main group, scouts—one after another, they were lost to the blue man's view as the great dragon surged to the fore.

The last rise loomed. Haral pressed the *hwalon* up it.

A moment later, they were plunging perilously down the steep wall of the left spur.

At the bottom, Haral wheeled the dragon to the right, back towards the spot where the two spurs came together. Riding swiftly to its mouth,

he took up a position in a side crevice where boulders permitted him a view of the valley's main course, while at the same time screening him from the view of the coleoptera.

A rattle of stones, the rustle of wing-sheaths, warned him of the beetles' approach. Seconds later, the two advance scouts came into view.

Haral sat statue-still in the *hwalon's* saddle. He shifted his grip closer to his lance's trigger.

The scouts came abreast his hiding-place, so close he could catch their smell and see their ray-tubes' glitter. He held his breath.

Then they passed on. Haral let out air.

Mandibles clacking like deadly castinets, the outriders moved up.

Again Haral froze.

But they, too, passed, unheeding.

Now louder sounds drifted to him. There was a whispering of hairy feet on sand; a slither of insectile bodies.

And, through it, a silvery voice rose, singing.

The main body of the coleoptera appeared. Kyla pocketed among them.

Her hair was mud-caked now, and streaked and straggling. Her garments, too, were torn, and bruises and cuts showed through the rents.

Yet still she sang her *Shamon* song, head high and back unbending. And if she reeled and stumbled as she walked, it was weariness and not defeat that caused it.

It came to Haral in that moment that even madness had its glory . . . that even death could be worth while.

He leaned forward, lance poised and focused on the coleoptera that shoved and buffeted her along.

But the time was not yet. Savagely, he fought down the rage that seethed within him, waiting while the beetles and their captive moved on past the spur that hid him and the *hwalon*.

Then, swiftly, before the rear guard could appear, he drove his great blue dragon forward—out of the crevice, out from behind the screening boulders, out of the spur canyon itself.

LIKE a thunderbolt, then, he charged, straight at the rear of the knot of huge scarlet beetles. His shout rose, a battle-cry of fury. The *hwalon's* rush drummed a death-roll.

A glad cry burst from Kyla's lips. She tried to dart to Haral.

But fatigue slowed her. A coleopteron sprang upon her from behind, and she crashed to the ground. Great mandibles reached out to crush her.

Haral blazed with his light-lance. The beetle died.

The girl lurched to her knees. But she could not rise. Another coleopteron rushed in to seize her.

Haral's *hwalon* lunged to her. Catching her up in one mighty claw, it dragged her close and stood above

her, defying the beetles with all the menace of its fangs and talons and horrid, hook-beaked head.

Haral whipped round his light-lance just as the pursuing insect flicked on its Q-ray. The savage jolt of the beam striking home rocked him in the saddle. But the heavy copronium armor's breastplate held. He triggered the lance.

The beetle spun crazily, legs kicking, as the life seared out of it.

The *hwalon* lifted Kyla. Swinging forward, heedless of the other Q-rays that now appeared close about him, the blue man caught her and dragged her up beside him.

Already, the *hwalon* was backing and pivoting with the amazing agility of its kind.

Again and again, Haral triggered the light-lance, clearing a path for them. They raced back up the valley in the same direction from which they'd come.

The two coleoptera of the rear guard, close in now, made one futile effort to cut them down. But the furious rush of the blue man and his dragon was too much for them. They broke, scrambling desperately for safety.

Then Haral, girl and *hwalon* were out of the narrow part of the valley. The broad expanse where travel was easier and faster lay before them.

But instead of taking it, the blue man turned the dragon back into the bleak, craggy hills. Grimly, he urged his mount on deeper and deeper into the wild mountains, all ups and

downs and steep rock ledges. He still had not spoken to the slim young *Shamon* priestess.

He wondered if it were because he was afraid to put into words the thoughts that gnawed within him.

But now she turned to him. "Where do we go, Haral?"

HE shrugged and gave her a twisted smile. "Where is there to go, Priestess Kyla? To the city, the spaceport. It's our only hope."

"The spaceport - -?"

"If we stay on Ulna, sooner or later Sark or Xaymar or the coleoptera will hunt us down. We've got to blast off, somehow, and that quickly."

She looked at him for a long moment, and it suddenly came to him that he had never realized before that her eyes were blue.

Blue, and calm, and very steady.

She said quietly, "I'll never leave Ulna, Haral."

There were the words he'd feared, already spoken. They tied a knot of tension in him.

"Not even after all this? Not even with your life at stake?"

"No, Haral. Not even if it means death in Sark's arena."

He smiled again, wryly, because he knew that if he didn't smile, the dark thoughts that came with his tension would boil over. "It's up to you. But I've no taste for Sark's tender mercies, and even less for Xaymar's."

She said, "I'm sorry," and would



have turned away. But now he would not, could not, let her. He lashed out:

"What do you mean, you're sorry? Sorry for what? That not every-one's fool enough to want to die on your crazy rockpile planet?"

Her eyes flashed. "Are you so afraid of death, then, blue man?"

"You ask it?" His fury ate into his words like acid. "You *dare* to ask it, after the blood I've shed just to save your lovely neck?"

The blue eyes lost their fire. "Haral, I'm sorry. Truly sorry - -"

But the rage that was in him now would not let him take up the peace he knew she was trying to offer.

"What do I care for dying? I've gambled my life a thousand times, a thousand ways. But curse me for a *chitza* if I want to die for nothing! What would it gain me or anyone else if I stayed here and drowned in my own blood in Sark's arena? If I perish, at least let it be somewhere along the road to empire, not here in the backwash of this pest-hole you call Ulna!"

The words quenched his fire, and as it died a strange confusion churned within him, a discomfiture that seemed to come only when he spoke with this slim girl, Kyla. Furiously, he riveted his gaze straight to the pathless wilderness ahead, trying to lose himself in scrutiny of the rocky course the *hwalon* followed.

But Kyla asked, "Is that, then, your only dream, Haral? A dream of empire? Is that the height of

your ambition?"

"What - - ?" He turned in the saddle to stare at her, as much for her tone as for her words. He thought he almost caught a note of sadness.

Or perhaps it was disillusion.

**I**N spite of him, it brought back the old, hot-blooded, restless, reckless fever: the fever that had carried him through all these years of blood and battle.

He threw out his challenge fiercely:

"What better dream can a fighting man have than one of empire, priest-ess? What higher ambition?"

She bit her lip. Her eyes fell before his onslaught.

"They spell out power, my priest-ess!" he cried in bitter triumph. "Power, do you hear? Without it, a man's as nothing - - sport for the rabble, fair game for every passing knave. With it - -"

"With it, you can be a butcher and a tyrant!" the girl slashed in upon him. He could see the lines of strain and inner tumult etch deeper into her face. "You can carve your bloody way like Sark himself, till some worse monster topples you from your throne!"

Haral clenched his fist. He threw his words like thundering boulders.

"Strength rules the void, woman! Give me the strength to carve my way and I'll ask no more!"

The girl's face whitened. Her lips trembled. Passion echoed in her voice: "But . . . is strength enough?"

Can you find the things you really seek in strength alone?"

"With power, I can do anything!"

"No! Power is not enough - -"

"It is! It is!" He could not hold down his heat, his fervor.

But how could he tell her? How could he make her understand?

And why did he care?

He clutched the saddle and started bleakly off across the crags. A flood of memories washed through him. And because their roots struck so very deep, he knew before he spoke that in spite of all his efforts, his words were going to come out as cold and hard as the stones of these barren mountains.

He said tightly: "I was born on Pallas. My ancestors came out to the asteroid belt from Earth as colonists, in the days when Earth still was mighty."

He could see the girl's eyes widen. "Then . . . you are of Earth—?"

"Of Earth?" Haral laughed harshly. "Call it that if you will. But what place is there for any colonist, anywhere, when the mother planet falls? The first of my people came out three hundred years ago. But by the time Earth at last was vanquished, no one cared from whence they came, or what happened to them. They were left on their own, to stay and face their troubles. The weak died; the strong survived."

He broke off, and looked away. The memories were roaring now. Emotion choked him. But it was as if he were a witness, speaking out

in behalf of all his hopeless, derelict kind. Coldly, brutally, he forced himself to speak on:

"I grew up watching the *Malyas* come, and the *Chonyas*, and a hundred mongrel raiders. When I was twelve, Ibarak's killers cut my father down, so Ibarak could add my mother to his harem."

HE heard Kyla's low gasp of horror, and the shock that was in the sound stabbed him with a feeling that held both pain and, somehow, a fierce, vindictive pleasure.

He said harshly: "It was his mistake. She slit his throat, and then her own."

"Oh, no—!"

"Yes!" He swung round, and looked squarely into the slim, lovely *Shamon's* eyes. "I swore an oath that day, my priestess—because that day I saw that nothing mattered save the power to take and hold. Love, honor, duty—what did they count? What had they done for my father, my mother, a million others like them? So I swore I'd live to see the time when no living creature in all the universe would dare to strike a blow against me. I swore I'd have the might to smash them, one and all!"

There was silence, then, for a vibrant moment, broken only by the scraping of the *hwalon's* claws as they moved over rock and slides of gravel.

At last Kyla said, "What can I

say, Haral?" And now pain was in her voice, too.

Wordless, tight-drawn, Haral nodded and turned away.

But then the girl spoke again: "I have long been Xaymar's priestess, blue one, and a priestess learns many things. Namboina himself it was who taught me to read men's hearts from the words they speak and the things they do, no matter how confused and torn they themselves might be."

Haral shrugged, not turning. Dimly, the priestess' words drifted to him through the haze of his own dark thoughts and feelings:

"Your life has been bitter, warrior—as empty as the void itself. But the thing you've sought, the thing you seek, is not an empire, no matter what you think. Even if fate should give you the power of which you dream, its savor would turn to ashes in your mouth."

**A** welling anger touched the blue man, and he twisted in its clutches. He'd saved this slim *Shamon* girl from the coleoptera; thrown away his own chance at destiny for her. Why could she not now let him be?

Yet still she spoke, almost as if she'd read his thoughts:

"You care nothing for destiny; not really. For if you did, you'd not be here with me now. What you truly seek is an excuse for living, a warmth to fill the void inside you. There lies the root of your reckless-

ness, your mad ambition."

The anger grew in Haral, and sweat drenched him inside his armor. The very rocks through which they rode seemed out of shape, distorted.

"Do you think me a fool or a child, then, not even able to see my own self straight? Or perhaps you believe me mad. Is that it?" He spat. "Why did you bother to come with me? Why didn't you stay with your thrice-cursed beetles?"

But Kyla's voice stayed calm . . . so calm it sent new fury through him.

She said: "I have no quarrel with you, warrior; and the thing you did for me is worth more credit than your words would ever give it. That is why I say that power will never fill the hunger in you. What you need is a cause to fight for and to live for, not greed and blood and booty."

"So you'd like to see me play the fool for Ulna! You want me, single-handed, to take on Sark and Xaymar and the coleoptera!"

As Haral lashed out, the *hwalon* topped another ridge.

In the distance loomed the squat buildings of the shabby spaceport town that was their destination.

Haral forgot his fury. Frowning, he headed the dragon down a steep ravine.

A gnawing doubt was growing in him. This was all so smooth, so easy . . .

Grimly, he debated the chance of

ambush before they reached the town.

Kyla said: "Truly, Ulna needs a champion—"

Haral bared his teeth and cursed aloud.

And as he cried out, the world exploded.

He didn't even see the blaster that knocked him down.

### CHAPTER VIII

THEY dragged Haral out of his cell just after noon.

Wearily, he raised his eyes from his shackled wrists and, squinting at the sudden glare, looked up into the yellow Ulnese sky.

He wondered, bleakly, if he'd ever get another chance to taste its freedom.

Then a *Pervod* took one arm, a *dau* the other. Roughly, they hurried him into the central park with shoves and buffets.

A shout went up from the lusting crowd—a shout for blood, a shout for slaughter. A Martian leaped forward to trip him. A Thorian slapped a tentacle savagely across his face, and he knew from the blinding pain that flesh had torn away under its suction.

Then he was stumbling through the blood-soaked sand of the arena to the bank of seats where the raider chieftains waited.

And there was Sark, just as before, sprawled out like some great, slimy slug in his ornate Uranian

riding-chair.

The raider's fat-rimmed eyes gleamed bright with murderous triumph now. He bared his teeth in a sinister smirk, and his whole gross body shook with a cruel laughter.

But his hand never left the cymosynthesizer switch.

There, too, sat Xaymar: living goddess, queen of storms, the prize that had drawn Sark here to Ulna.

Even now, standing there before her, Haral felt the spell of her vibrant, voluptuous loveliness. With wrenching force, it came to him what a fool he'd been to go against her; to toss away her favor and all it stood for in order to take his own mad road.

Her ripe lips curved into a smile.

He wondered if she were laughing at him behind the jeweled veil that masked her.

But if she were, what did it matter? What difference could it make to him, in this last hour of his bitter odyssey?

Then, half-unconsciously, he straightened. His thoughts, at least, were still his own. No one need know that regret, despair, welled high within him. He could die as he'd lived, by the warrior's creed, head high and neck unbending.

It was as if the very gesture rekindled some near-dead spark within him. A little of his feeling of hopelessness and black dejection seemed to fall away. Coolly, almost, he gazed about him.

It dawned on him, now, that the mob gathered here to watch his downfall was not quite the same as the one he'd faced that other day when he'd first blazed his path across Sark's devilish drive for conquest.

For now coleoptera were massed along one side of the arena. A rustling, eddying sea of vivid scarlet, they crowded close by the chieftains' stand, as if drawn to the incredible woman who was their ruler by a magnet.

Then a new, wild shout roared up from the crowd.

Haral shot a quick glance back across his shoulder.

The yelling mob was parting. Two more crewmen drove through the throng, dragging along another prisoner.

A lovely prisoner.

Kyla.

Or did her beauty now lie only in his own eyes?

**B**LOOD ran down her face. Her features were drawn to a mask of anguish. When she stumbled, one of the raiders caught her by the hair and jerked her upright.

In the stand, Sark rocked with laughter.

Then she was standing, swaying, in the crewmen's grip, beside Haral.

Sark's laughter died. He leaned forward, thick lips working. His fat face was a study in sadistic fury.

A hush fell over the crowd.

He cried: "So, *chitzas!* Now you

die!"

The silence rolled like thunder.

Haral stood wordless. He could barely see Kyla, out of the tail of his eye.

She did not move. She did not speak. Only the way her breasts rose and fell too fast whispered of the conflict that churned within her.

Or was it exertion, sheer weariness, that made her breathe so hard?

Now, savagely, Sark turned on the blue man.

"You, warrior!" He spat, and his face contorted. "Warrior? I'll teach you to call yourself a warrior, *starbo!* You talked bold, you *zanat*, when you rode in here with your *hwalon* and your armor and your light-lance. But there's *kabat* in your veins instead of blood. Now you'll learn to crawl, and beg for death!"

Haral stood very still. A haze seemed to hang over the leering crowd, the blood and dirt, the yellow sky.

How had Sark said it, that other time? "*Why have you come so long a way to die?*"

Here it had begun. Here it was ending.

This was his destiny.

And here was Kyla. Here was Xaymar . . .

Xaymar, most beautiful of women, with a body to tempt a man to hell. Paradise, and infinite evil. His chance for power and glory.

Xaymar, in a clinging scarlet

gown.

The smile still lingered on her lips.

How had Sark lured her here, after all his treachery?

But then, hatred made strange partners.

And they were waiting for him to crawl.

Recklessly, then, he laughed aloud. With a twist and a jerk, he tore free from the grasp of the raider crewmen and strode forward.

He could see Sark's web-fingered hand knot convulsively on the cymosynthesizer switch.

He laughed again, and made his voice ring: "Bring on your torture, *stabats!* I'll show you how a warrior dies!"

A spasm of rage shook Sark's gross body. His face grew purple as Ulna's peaks. "You *chitza—!*" His voice rose crazily, shrilly. "Throw him in the ring! Let the beetles tear his flesh from his bones! Stake him out and let them feast upon him before he dies!"

A clacking of mandibles rose, a hideous, castaneting rattle. A thousand protuberant, multi-faceted insectile eyes drew into focus.

In spite of himself, Haral felt the hair on his nape go stiff.

The crewmen moved in to seize him.

"Die with this thought, you fool!" Sark shouted. "Xaymar has pledged herself to share her secret with me! I'll have the lightning for my weap-

on! Die thinking of me with the universe in my power, Haral! Die! Die—"

And then, for the first time, Xaymar spoke: "No, Sark." Her tone was flat, decisive, final.

The raider chief went rigid in his riding-chair. His bulbous head swiveled. "What—?"

She smiled, a lazy, mocking smile. Her hand came up in an easy gesture. "I said no, he does not die. Not till he's heard a thing I have to say. That is the only reason that I've come here." Her voice dropped a note. "Perhaps . . . he need not die at all."

"No!" Sark shouted, and even through the fat, muscles stood out along his neck and jaws. "He dies, I tell you! Here, now, in this arena—"

The woman's lithe body seemed to draw together like that of a tigress crouching. "I say he lives!" she slashed back fiercely. And then, with swift, deadly emphasis: "Or . . . would *you* rather die?"

Grey came to Sark's puffed, blubbery face, washing out the purple. Flecks of foam formed at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes were suddenly diamond-bright with hate and fear. Snarling, incoherent sounds bubbled in his throat.

"You may make the choice," said Xaymar smoothly. "Which shall it be *Gar* Sark?"

The harsh sounds ceased. The raider chief sank back into his chair.

Still smiling, the woman men call-

ed Xaymar turned once more to Haral; and of a sudden the strange, dark, nameless evil of her reached out to him in throbbing, vibrant waves.

"Would you live, blue warrior?" she asked softly.

**N**ARROW-eyed, wary, he tried to read her face through the masking veil. His nerves all at once were like groping tendrils, so sharply tuned his whole body ached with tension.

He said: "Let me hear the price before I answer."

"It is not high . . ."

"Let me hear it!"

The ripe lips parted. Her sleek, voluptuous body seemed to reach out to his till, eerily, it was almost as if he could feel it pressed against him.

She said: "Never before you have I met a man with fire to match my own, blue warrior! Always, my lovers fawned and flattered, whimpering phrases that were half fear, half weakness."

"The price!"

"But you—you waded through your own blood to find me! You would have taken me by force! You dared to strike me down!"

She came to her feet in one lithe movement. Her voice took on new vibrance.

"You still may have me, warrior—both me, and my secrets! I'll give them gladly, if I can only share your destiny, travel with you . . ."

She paused, and the feeling of dark sin and horror that radiated from her wound round Haral—enveloping, all-pervasive. He swayed, caught up in the surging power of it as by bonds of steel.

Her words came, dim and distant:

"Grant me only one favor, blue man . . . only one, and all shall be yours!"

Haral did not speak.

"Give me the woman, warrior! Give me the *Shamon* priestess to do with as I will, to prove that you are truly mine!"

The horror was no longer nameless. The evil took form in words of fire.

Haral choked. "No! Not Kyla—!"

"Sit here beside me as my lover, while my children feast upon her body—" Xaymar's gesture took in the whole blank-eyed, slithering, lusting beetle horde. "Bind yourself to me with this one sacrifice of passion—"

"No!" screamed Haral. "No, no—!"

The words came from his throat, but it was not his voice. The world rocked. His body shook, and he could not stop it.

Xaymar's hands, her voice, reached out to him, cajoling: "What can her one life mean to you, who have carved your destiny in blood? What can she matter, this *Shamon* scum?"

"No—!"

"Look deep within you, warrior! Look to your dreams of empire, your ambition! Look to me—"

AS she spoke, with one tempestuous sweep, she flung wide her scarlet gown and stood before him naked, as she had lain beneath the crystal bubble in her deep-sunk vault. Her hand moved sensually over the sleek curves of her perfect body. Her midnight hair rippled in the breeze.

"Look at me, blue man! Look—and then tell me you can reject me for another!" Her voice swelled with a richer timbre. "I am yours, warrior—and I know you want me, for I have looked into your brain! It was I who reached out across the miles and found you, through your *Shamon* girl's unguarded mind, so that Sark could seize you and bring you here. I've been inside you all the time you've stood in this arena—thinking your thoughts, feeling the things you felt. I know you better than you know yourself. I know how many times you've cursed yourself for giving me up to save this other creature. Now, at this very moment, you waver. Why should you die with her, when you can live and see your dreams of power come true and have me, Xaymar, queen of storms, most beautiful of women?"

Haral could not make the world stop rocking. His body was a numb, unfeeling thing. His brain . . . his brain— He clutched his head between his shackled hands and tried to fight, to think, to slash the haze away.

Xaymar cried: "Come to me, warrior!"

Numbly, dumbly, he stared at her, swaying.

She raised her hands. "Come . . .!" And as she spoke, it was as if her fingers had reached into his mind—twisting it; pulling . . .

He stumbled towards her, a single step.

"Come!"

This time the word was in his brain itself, not in his ears. He took another step. Another.

"Come . . . come . . . come . . ."

It was like that other night—was it a million years ago?—the night he'd heard the coleoptera calling.

But the thing the beetles called was "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Kill the man-things.

He staggered forward.

And there was Xaymar, ripe lips smiling. He felt her arms go tight about him, the pressure of her naked body on him.

He tried to think of Kyla.

But what was Kyla? Why should he die for a girl called Kyla when he could live and have his dreams and Xaymar?

*Kill the man-things.*

Blonde hair, and a slim young body. Courage, and a head held proudly.

Xaymar. Power, and ripe lips, hot with passion.

*Kill the man-things.*

"Kiss me, warrior." A jeweled veil-mask.

What did it hide?

*Kill the man-things!*

But Kyla . . . No—! Not even for



power could he give up Kyla! Not send her to her death, to the coleoptera—!

SOMETHING snapped inside Haral. The world went mad. His brain was on fire, on fire, twisting and turning, turning and burning, pulled through his skull by sensuous fingers.

He couldn't think. His body was a bursting entity of anguish.

*Kill the man things!*

Jewels glinting in a filmy mask. Spasmodically, he jerked away. Convulsive, clutching, without volition, his hands clawed up into Xaymar's face and snatched away the veil.

The fire in his brain went out. The torment ended. Staggering, he saw the world without the haze.

Now Xaymar's hands were before her face; her fingers masking, shielding.

Savagely, he caught her wrists and jerked them down . . . stared into her eyes.

He almost screamed aloud.

Because her eyes were not humanoid eyes.

Faceted, fixed, protuberant, glassy, they were *insectile!*

The eyes of a beetle, a coleopteron!

A phrase she'd used came back: ". . . while my children feast . . ."

Through the horror and shock that froze him, he heard Sark shouting: "Seize him! Seize him—!"

Hands clutched his arms. They

jerked him back and pinned him down.

Xaymar said; "So at last you know . . ." and now her voice crawled with hate and fury.

Haral did not answer.

She raved at him: "Yes! I am of the coleoptera—a mutant, and a hybrid! Now you know how I gave them the power of thought! Those that think are my own children, my descendants! And now you know, too, why I took a thousand and human lovers, and slew each one before the dawn. For I have human passion hot within me, but no man could forbear to look beneath my veil, and with my brain close-tuned to theirs, I felt the horror well up in them—the same disgust and loathing that even you cannot conceal. So I killed them, that they might never tell my secret—"

She broke off. Her hands clenched till blood spurted where the nails gouged through the palms. Her voice rose—hysterical, vindictive. "Throw him alive into the arena! Yes, let my children feast upon him—!"

THE crewmen jerked Haral to his feet again. The coleoptera surged forward. He glimpsed slim Kyla, with horror written on her lovely face . . . Sark, doubled over, gloating and laughing . . . the seething fury that dwelt in Xaymar.

But now his brain was clear again. the shadow of the nameless evil gone. Fire surged in his veins, and wild, reckless daring.

The *dau* and the *Pervod* dragged him towards the beetles.

He cried, "I'll meet my fate standing, you *chitzas!*" and kicked with all his might for the *Pervod's* fragile reptilian ankle.

He heard the bones snap over all the tumult. The *Pervod's* shriek rang like the scream of a sky-shell.

He snatched for its ray-gun.

The *dau's* great arms caught him as the weapon tore loose from the holster. He felt his ribs cracking as it lifted him—crushed him.

Desperately, he triggered the beam square into its belly.

The hairy arms dropped him. The *dau* sprawled back, dying.

Haral spun round, still firing.

The beam caught the first of the onrushing beetles. It seared through a second A third reeled and stumbled.

Haral lunged for the chiefs' stand.

Sark stood there, stiff-frozen. Xaymar lurched back in terror.

Haral cried: "Die, curse you!"

He whipped up the ray-gun.

But Sark shrieked, "Wait, blue man—! You and all Ulna die here with me!"

His gross body twisted, and Haral saw the fat fingers still locked on the cymosynthesizer switch.

In the same instant the raider chief's other hand darted beneath his tent-like tunic, incredibly fast, snatching out a Venusian *xlan*-tube.

Blue fire belched at Haral.

He threw himself flat. But it was the end. It could be no other way.

This was where destiny and the road to empire at last had led him.

To failure. To death. To his blood in the dirt of Sark's arena.

Why had he picked such a road to travel? What good did it do to die, when even death was empty, without meaning?

Unless, perhaps, he could save Ulna . . .

He triggered the ray-gun as the fire seared down his back.

But not at Sark. His target was the cymosynthesizer switch; the cable.

Through a haze of pain, he saw them fuse; saw Sark's hand, too, turn to sifting ashes.

The raider screamed and surged forward.

Haral triggered a final beam.

It tore Sark's bulbous head from his shoulders.

The roar of the mob, lunging in for the kill, came dimly to the blue man's ears.

He was glad. They'd at least put an end to his agony.

But the roar seemed to die again, and he wondered if perhaps some dark corner of his brain still functioned in its way after consciousness had left him.

Then hands touched his face; soft hands, caressing.

WITH a tremendous, wrenching effort, he opened his eyes, and there was Kyla, with tears on her cheeks and soft lips atremble.

But where was the crowd, the

beetles, the cutthroat crewmen?

Another face came . . . the face of Xaymar.

As from afar, her words came fiercely: "I hate you, warrior, for you spurn me for a stupid *Shamon* child! But I am of Ulna, and again you have saved my life and planet. So, now, my coleopteran legions shall protect you till my science can give back your daring and make your body whole once more. My projectors, too, my secrets of the wind and rain, the lightning—I leave them in your hands to help you guard this world of mine, till my own day to strike shall come. But for myself, I must go back to frozen sleep again, for another thousand years, lest I should rise and slay you in my fury!"

Her face, her voice, faded into distance; and he wondered if it were only in his mind that he seem-

ed to hear a final, gentler whisper: ". . . And I shall dream of you a thousand years, my warrior . . ."

Then Kyla's tears were on his cheeks, too; her soft lips pressed against his. And there was peace in him at last, and he was at one with his dreams, his destiny.

\* \* \*

*Naked, still as death, the veiled woman-goddess men called Xaymar rested on a gold-draped dais within a great, glowing, crystal ball.*

*Xaymar, passionate goddess, queen of storms. Ruler of rain and wind and lightning, empress of all the surging forces that spread their tumult across the sky. Sainted monster, evil savior. Old as time, and young as jolly. Born of woman, damned of men, wise with dark wisdom gone astray . . .*

THE END

## Blood Cleaning Service

"PARDON me, sir, but would you care to send your blood to the cleaners?"

Ordinarily you'd think anyone asking such a question would be completely off his rocker. But as a matter of fact there is nothing at all humorous about it—and it can and is being done!

A machine has been built to save people whose kidneys have temporarily ceased functioning. When they cease functioning, poisoning takes place in the body because the

blood is no longer cleaned by those organs. In the new machine, the blood is actually pumped from the body and back again through cellophane-lined tubing. The poisons permeate through the tubing and are oxidized and the blood returned to the body! This fantastic apparatus may be kept operating almost indefinitely and it enables the kidneys to rest, recover, and eventually resume their ordinary function. Yes, you can send your blood to the cleaners!

# SPACE OPERA



*By*  
*John W. Jakes*

**Things were tough on Agamemnon IV. Not only was the opera company a bust, but the natives had a yen to sing—without the aid of vocal chords! . . .**

**J**OE Galaxy lifted his hands despondently. "So we only had two paid admissions last night. Where does that leave us?"

Angela Svedborg yawned and stretched her disconcerting legs. She waved her cigarette at the dirty hotel window, an expression of resigned boredom on her beautiful face. "Look out the window."

Joe Galaxy did so, and groaned. He saw a few straggly hills, a pale pink sky, one or two taverns, a rocket field, the catalyst tunnels and offices, and a tumbling mass of boards known as the Agamemnon iv Opera House.

"Whoever put up a theater on this hunk of spacerock," Galaxy said, "should have been shot the day he was born." He sat down on the bed. It let out a screeching twang. He got up quickly.

"We shouldn't of tried to culture the catalyst miners," Manny said glumly. "When I was working at the Hot Orbit Burlesque House at Port of Mars, we never tried to culture the customers. And we always had 'em."

"You're paid to make noise on the drums," Joe replied, a bit miffed. "And besides, the Spatial Light Opera Company is not for culture. It's for making money."

"Hah!" said Angela loudly.

"And that goes for you too," Joe said hotly. "You wave your baton and leave the rest to me."

"Certainly," she said bitterly. "An impressario who can't impressar."

Joe walked forward nervously and conked his knee on the dresser. It wheezed and one leg fell off. There was a loud crunching and the thing settled to the floor. Joe's cup of wrath was running over.

"That does it. Three parsecs from nowhere and nobody wants to see our show. *The Student Prince*, greatest piece of riot comedy with music the universe has ever known!"

"It stinks," Angela said. "We play it for laughs."

"You can't play the show straight any more," Manny objected. "It's schmaltzy."

"Let's forget about that," Joe interrupted. "We've got a jet full of orchestra and stagehands and scenery and costumes and cast, and supposedly the most beautiful girls ever seen out here. But what in the name of Ziggy Romberg are we going to do with them?"

"Face life," Angela advised, reaching for the bottle of Elixir Vitamin B Complex. "There's no percentage on Agamemnon iv. And we can't go on living off this stuff

forever."

"Take some clothes off the girls," Manny suggested. "That'll wow 'em."

"WE have exactly three hundred solars to our credit," Joe figured aloud. "We owe Rbolfi three hundred solars for the opera house rent, which was supposed to be paid from our performance receipts, which amounted to exactly six credits, since the boys out here have seen *The Student Prince* until they know it by heart. Old Rbolfi has his native yokels guarding the ship and he won't release it until we pay him. If we pay him, we won't have any money to buy fuel to get off Agamemnon. So what do we do, I ask you?"

"Ring for a cybernetic," Angela told him.

Joe frowned. "And I wish you wouldn't wear those shorts all the time. It bothers me."

She looked directly at him with her large blue eyes. "Joseph Galaxy, if you promote your way out of this, I'll let you stop chasing me and we'll get married. Then, I'll do anything you tell me to. But the way it looks now, I'll be an old maid." She headed for the door. "Think I'll see if there's any more Elixir left."

"Kid," Manny said, scratching his head, "you got just the figure for the Hot Orbit Burlesque House."

"But I like ol' daddy Wagner. I'm cultured." She grinned and clos-

ed the door.

"Let's go," Galaxy said, reaching for his hat and dragging Manny erect.

"Where?" the drummer whined plaintively. "Go where?"

"I honestly don't know. But I'm going to study this little deal, because I've been after Miss Svedborg for years, and besides, I want the Spatial Light Opera Company to make money from *The Student Prince*. It's the only property we've got rights to."

"We never worried, back at the . . ." Manny began.

Joe menaced him with the empty elixir bottle, and he scuttled for the exit.

A washline was strung from the fins of the rocket, dangling lingerie. Some of the boys in the band were whooping it up with Gershwin in the astrogation room. A few electricians played weary pin-ochle against the patched-up hull. The chorus girls lay near a top blister, exposing themselves to the watery pink sunlight.

As Manny and Joe made their way down one of the hills toward the ship, they saw the native guards standing off to themselves, joggling their big lime heads and holding their energy release guns in three-fingered fists.

Joe noted that one of the men on duty was old Rbolfi himself, leader of the thirty-odd natives in-

habiting the tiny planetoid. He walked in Rbolfi's general direction.

The two natives were conversing, but as usual, Joe could not hear what they said. Their mouths moved, and that was all. As he drew near, he felt the sense of uneasiness that came when he overheard any of them in their normal speech habits. Manny was glancing over his shoulder fearsomely, as if watching for hellbats and assorted goblins.

"Step up vibration, boys," Joe announced. "The Earthies have arrived."

Old Rbolfi turned and bowed low. "Most happy to see you, Galaxy. And how was the performance?" He spoke with effort, and his voice was a squeaky, wire-in-a-windstorm twang.

"You know damn well how it was. Two lousy customers."

"Regrettable. Most regrettable." The second native merely nodded, not wishing to indulge in the effort of speaking so the Earthmen could hear.

"We've got to talk this thing out," Joe said flatly.

"I feel that we have discussed everything," Rbolfi stated.

Joe blinked at the sky. "Well, here it is. We've got three hundred solars in the till. That'll buy us fuel from the catalyst company to get us off this little bubble in hell. We aren't going to pay you any rent!"

He stuck his hands in his pockets

and assumed a belligerent pose.

"A defiant attitude. I must be paid for use of the opera house. If you do not pay me, I shall be forced to turn my release gun on your ship and transform it into a large explosion. Any attempt to leave Agamemnon without paying will also result in this."

JOE was losing faith in himself as a promoter by large gobs. "But look," he wheedled, "isn't there anything you'll take instead of solars?"

Rbolfi started to negate the question, hesitated, and conferred silently with his companion. Joe and Manny got the jumps until the two ceased their deliberation.

"We . . . ah . . . do have one desire. In fact, since your company came to Agamemnon, all of my people have been wishing for one thing." He beamed as brightly as was possible from a lime face. "We have watched many of your Dimensional Viz Broadcasts, and all thirty-three of us have a desire to be in . . ." He raised one spindly arm dramatically. ". . . *the theater!*"

Joe cringed.

"Put us in your show," Rbolfi hurried on. "Give us parts and let us join you in your travels, and we will waive the rent and let you buy fuel."

"That's right," asserted the second native, straining himself.

Joe gulped, loudly. "Can . . . can you sing?"

Rbolfi was downcast. "I don't really know. We can talk to your Earthmen, if we try. But as for singing . . ."

Manny tugged at his sleeve. "Joe, for Europa's sake, let's all shoot ourselves. We can't use *creatures!*"

Rbolfi recoiled at the word, but Joe made a pacifying gesture. He wanted to get off Agameinnon, and he wanted Miss Angela Svedborg, and if he had to be stuck with thirty-three lime parties for a while, well . . .

He became businesslike. "Bring all your folks down to the opera house. Manny, round up the band and find Angela. Audition in thirty minutes."

He turned quickly and walked away over the hill. The road back to the so-called town was unusually rocky, and the pink sky, for some reason, nauseated him.

ANGELA dangled her long legs from the stool, tapping the baton restlessly on one knee. "I'm not particularly crazy about this idea, Joe. Playing for a bunch of . . ."

He jammed a finger in front of her mouth. "Quiet! Do you want them to get offended? It's the only way."

She glowered. "You're just doing this because I committed myself."

He smirked back. "You're damned right." Before she could say more, he was up the stairs and onto the stage. He clapped his hands and

the orchestra boys stopped their scraping and tootling. Manny gave one last tap on the snare drum and sighed.

Joe passed out sheet music to the thirty-three lime people, who included in their midst about twelve women and a half-dozen or so toddling green kiddies. "Now folks, this is the music to the first act *Drinking Song*. When the orchestra comes to your part, just follow the notes and sing."

"Thank you," said old Rbolfi courteously, handing back the music, "but we can't read notes."

"Oh," said Joe in a small voice. "Well, just sing."

He hurried down from the stage and took a seat in the first row. Angela received his nod and raised her baton. Several of the lime parties simpered self-consciously, and a fat infant giggled.

The orchestra swung into the stirring, if now antiquated, strains of Romberg's music. Joe tensed, waiting for the part where the chorus came in.

They came in.

But he couldn't hear a thing. Nobody could. Rbolfi's people just stood there, moving their mouths. Joe felt suddenly sad. He wanted to cry, for no reason at all. So did all the boys in the orchestra, from their pained expressions.

"We cannot raise our voices if we sing," old Rbolfi tried to explain above the din.



Joe waved a hand. "Keep trying," he yelled.

The sadness vanished. He became uneasy, gazing about. Several of the musicians flatted notes. Angela got lost in mid-beat and had to wait a couple of bars to get the tempo.

And the lime people opened and closed their mouths, framing the Terran lyrics, but not producing one normal musical tone.

Joe clutched the arm of the seat. He was *scared!* Why, he didn't know, but his back crawled with sweat. All the invisible demons of sorcery seemed to grip him.

ANGELA threw down her baton and jumped off the stool. "Cut it out. Joe," she cried hysterically. "They're driving us crazy!" The musicians gave a few more meager tootles and discontinued activities altogether. There was a scramble to escape from the pit.

Joe noticed that the lime folks were still singing.

He staggered from the seat, feeling lead weights that weren't there pulling him down. "All right," he croaked, "that's, enough." They stopped singing.

And he felt fine again, or at least, normal.

"Will you take us?" old Rbolfi inquired, peering over the anemic footlights.

Angela chuckled with relief. "Do you think we're *that* crazy?"

"Wait a minute," Joe breathed.

"Let's try a strip tease in the first act," Manny offered.

"*Wait a minute! Don't anybody move!*"

Joe dashed from the opera house, over several straggling hills, and into the office of the catalyst mines. Two clerks mumbled, "No tickets," and threw themselves under a desk, rolling their eyes frantically.

Joe slammed into the lab and up to Perrywhite.

"I want to ask you a question," he panted.

Perrywhite put down the detonation cap and took off his glasses. "Please," he said pitifully, "I don't want *any* tickets to the *Student Prince*."

"Forget about tickets. Tell me what you know about how these naitves speak."

Perrywhite thought a minute. "What corresponds to vocal bands in their throats produces sound vibrations below the threshold of human hearing."

"Subsonic, isn't that what you call it?" Joe exclaimed.

"Right," said Perrywhite, amazed at Galaxy's new and devious methods of coercion.

But Joe pressed him for information and didn't advertise. "Isn't it true that subsonic vibrations, as they go down the scale or whatever, produce feelings of sadness, and then anxiety, and then holy-hell heebie jeebies?"

"Right," said the astounded Perry-

white once more. "How do you know?"

Joe rushed away. "I flunked out of Marsopolis U." He tossed a handful of pasteboards on the floor as he departed. "Have some tickets. Have a whole lot of tickets."

Back at the opera house, he leaped to a dramatic pose on the stage and announced, "Folks, we're getting out of here. That includes you, Rbolfi, and all your friends. In a month or so, we'll be opening at the Moonpalace on Luna. Good old Luna! Load the stuff into the ship. We jet off in forty-five minutes, as soon as I buy the fuel."

"What are you up to?" Angela asked skeptically.

"Get yourself a ring, honey," Joe advised, leering as he ran from the stage.

HE was very busy for the next three quarters of an hour. Fuel was purchased from the miners and piped into the ship. Additional quarters were found for the bewildered natives, who were suddenly becoming accustomed to the theatrical tradition of leaving home, mother and dog at a moment's notice.

Joe ended up in the ship's library. He yanked a copy of the *Prince* libretto from the film file and threaded it into the viewer. Then he got out his typewriter.

The com box buzzed. "Manny in the control room, Joe. Jets ready. What's the course?"

"Get a reading for Luna, the quickest route possible."

"Check."

The jets creaked rheumatically and the ship lifted. Thankfully, Joe saw the pink atmosphere of Agamemnon iv drop away beneath a port. He closed the lead shutter and began a rewrite on the book of the show.

The typewriter keys clacked.

*Take out the corny laughs!*

The keys jumped faster.

*Put back the old bathos!*

The keys flashed and thrummed into tearing, invisible motion.

*And make it the biggest slam-bang revival old Sol ever saw!*

\* \* \*

When they got to Luna, Plato Pottbaum, the system's foremost showman, didn't care for the idea. Joe arranged a demonstration. Plato began to eat the asbestos curtain, admitting it was moderately great, and booked them on a cooperative basis because he knew Joe from carny days on Venus.

The show went into rehearsals. Joe hired sonics engineers to determine the proper frequencies for the natives, who basked in the hectic light of the backstage world.

When the ads went out over the viz to the Sol planets that Pottbaum, affectionately known in the show world as "old P. P.," was opening his new season with a revival of *The Student Prince*, there were critical guffaws.

**B**UT when opening night came, the salon was alive with people who just *couldn't* miss a first night at Pottbaum's Moonpalace, no matter how rancid the play. For hours before curtain time, jets flashed down out of the dark lunar sky and into the atmospheric bowl covering the huge theater. As eight-thirty drew near and the orchestra filed into the pit, robed dignitaries were packed even into the gallery. Pottbaum sat up in his office and counted the receipts. A nice take, even if it might be only a one-night stand.

At one minute before eight-thirty, Joe assembled the cast on stage.

"If any one of you ever breathes a word about how we're doing this, the show'll fold. You want a nice fat future. You don't breathe."

He gestured to the lime people. "Get into your brick room."

They scuttled away backstage. Joe peeked out through a hole in the curtain. Angela in her conducting costume which resembled a scandalous black nightie, was receiving enthusiastic applause, especially from the bald daddies in the front row. Manny actually looked confident, hunched over his drums.

Joe threw the switch. A green light flashed on the lip of the pit. The house lights vanished to nothing. The golden magic of the footlights played over the blood red curtain. The air was electric, tingling, expectant.

Angela raised her baton and brought it down. Manny slammed the kettledrums.

And the show was on.

It was, basically, a straight performance. Karl Franz still went to the university and fell in love with Kathy the waitress, and left her for the throne and his imperial duty. He still returned to Heidelberg to see her one final time.

But at specific points in the show, like when the Prince on stage was informed that he must leave school because he had to take over his dying father's post as king, a mike was switched on.

In a brick room to the rear of the stage, the lime folks began to sing noiselessly. No one heard their singing. The cast and orchestra knew where it came from, and were not alarmed by the emotions gripping them. But the entire auditorium was a mass of humanity that wept and moaned and knew exactly how Karl Franz felt because *they* felt the same way. Sad. Utterly, miserably sad.

**B**Y the time Karl Franz decided to go back to Heidelberg, things were going very well indeed. The Prince raged onstage, doubted, and tormented by conflicting emotions. And in the brick room, old Rbolfi and his friends crept down the sub-sonic scale and the audience felt unreasoning panic and confusion. One of the foremost Venusian critics took

a bite out of his program and Joe knew they had a hit.

Next morning, the viz casts proclaimed their glory.

"Gripping beyond words!" announced a Martian critic.

"Never," commented the Venusian, "has such consummate skill been displayed on any stage in any time or space. The company under the inspired direction of Joseph Galaxy, who will doubtless go down as one of the all-time theatrical greats, projects a panoply of sweeping emotional climaxes that seizes the audience with triumphant artistic empathy! It is magnificent!"

A Terran critic said simply, "It beats hell out of you."

\* \* \*

Joe sat drinking coffee in P. P.'s office. Angela cuddled against him.

"Well," he said, "did you buy the ring?"

Meekly, she showed him a small box containing a diamond. "Had it teleported from Chicago this morning."

He put his arm around her and sighed with satisfaction. "This is

going to be an indefinite run, honey. As long as we've got something different, people will pay to see it. And there are plenty of star systems, with enough audiences to last a lifetime. Which is probably how long we'll be here. This show will become an institution, like Saturn's rings or Mother's Day. Plato is out arranging things now."

"Arranging what?" she cooed dreamily.

"Housing units. Kitchens. The works. Some of the kids in the show have decided to get married. Even old Rbolfi and his people are happy. And by the way, I sent for a minister ten minutes ago." He pinched her wickedly.

The door opened. Manny peered in.

"Boss, I'm taking the shuttle to Port of Mars. Be back for the show tonight. Want to see some of the old gang at the Hot Orbit."

"Go away," Joe murmured darkly. "We're starting a family any minute now."

Manny gulped and closed the door with monumental rapidity.

## INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR — *Mari Wolf*

(Continued from Page 2)

this time, too, that I discovered science fiction and started reading it in the duller moments of geography class.

I had my first taste of being a

columnist when I was in junior high. My weekly column in the Laguna Beach paper covered, of all things, adult education. I used to sit backstage taking down notes on child

psychology while the lecturers glared at me for getting in their way. And on December 8, 1941, I reported the rather apologetic talk by a man whose preannounced topic had been, "Why There Will Be No War with Japan."

Along about then I had all sorts of varied ambitions. I wanted to be, alternately, a ballerina, a professional horsewoman, and a stunt girl in the movies. My favorite pastimes were diving off rocks and riding horses over fences. But I managed to put in some time at college at UCLA, majoring very prosaically in mathematics.

Since college I've done various things. I taught dancing for a while. I did some modeling. I spent a lot of time out at the stables. And I

kept on reading science fiction. Eventually I became acquainted with Los Angeles fandom and became an Outlander.

Then I read in Rog Phillips' Club House in *Amazing Stories* how much fun science fiction conventions can be, and I made up my mind to go to the one in Portland.

The rest is the sort of storybook plot that I sneer at whenever I read it in the magazines. On September 1, 1951, I went to the Norwescon and met Rog Phillips. On October 24th we were married. Which brings me up to the present, to our apartment in Hollywood, Fandora's Box, and the end of this story about me, the part that always reads . . . And they lived happily ever after.

— *Mari Wolf*

## *You'll Roast In Space!*

THE boys who plan the future rockets are beating their heads against a wall. They've come up against a tough problem—how do you keep a spaceship cool?

Contrary to popular opinion you don't worry about freezing in a hypothetical spaceship. The sun's light alone, to which you're constantly exposed provides enough heat to make life aboard the ship impossible. In addition you have the motors and electronic devices providing heat also—not to mention the heat-producing human body.

There are some steps which can be taken. First, the exterior of the ship can be made a perfect reflec-

tor by silverying and polishing it. This is the major step. Secondly, if the ship is two-hulled the inner wall will be separated from the outer by space's own vacuum—a perfect insulator. And then some sort of radiating device be provided.

A simple refrigerating system just won't do unless the heat-radiating element of it can be operated at a very high temperature. Radiation at room or body temperature is simply too slow a process.

In spite of all the tales told of freezing in the "utterly cold vacuum of space" the chances are much more likely that spacemen may suffocate and roast to death!

# ONCE UPON A MONBEAST...

*By*

*Charles E. Fritch*

**Pity the poor science fiction writer who creates bug-eyed monsters. You only see them in print—he may have to live with a few! . . .**



**T**HAT'S not my real name up there, and in a little while you'll discover the reason why. If you read my real name attached to this, you'd think it was just another fantastic yarn I batted out and then you'd forget it. And you'd laugh. You'll probably laugh anyway—for awhile—but I've got to get this thing off my chest once and for all.

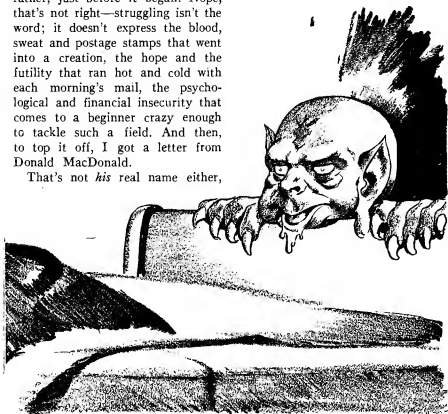
I was a struggling science-fiction author at the time it began—or rather, just before it began. Nope, that's not right—struggling isn't the word; it doesn't express the blood, sweat and postage stamps that went into a creation, the hope and the futility that ran hot and cold with each morning's mail, the psychological and financial insecurity that comes to a beginner crazy enough to tackle such a field. And then, to top it off, I got a letter from Donald MacDonald.

That's not *his* real name either,

and in a little while you'll find out the reason why. He's one of the all-time greats in science-fiction and still is, and a fan not knowing his work would be suspected of having lost his marbles. So a "name" author writes me a letter. Great, huh?

No.

I'd sent MacDonald a batch of my manuscripts, humbly asking the great man to favor them with a glance if a moment ever came while



he was resting a bit between dashing off novelettes. And would he kindly let me know—frankly, honestly, without fear of injuring my delicate feelings—what he thought of the work?

He would. And did. The letter read:

"Dear Mr. . . . :

I appreciate your efforts at trying to crack the stf field, but I'm afraid I'll have to disillusion you. I have read your manuscripts with considerable care and am sorry to report that you seem to have no talent for writing and especially none for science-fiction.

I would suggest you turn your energies to something else—saxophone playing, stamp collecting—anything else. If you insist upon writing, however, have you considered fillers?

Best wishes,

Donald MacDonald."

What I should have done was go out into the country, and let the gathering steam blow its lid. But I didn't. If I'd gotten an automobile in motion, I would have run down the nearest boy scout just to see his blood spatter. Instead, I sat down and wrote a letter to Mr. Donald MacDonald.

It was a fine letter, full of colorful phrases and split infinitives. To hell with grammar at a time like that, I rationalized. I told him in no uncertain terms just what I thought of him and his criticisms. I'd be a science-fiction writer just

to show him up for the incompetent he was, I said. I guess I said a lot of things. It was a letter full of more than fire and brimstone. It was radioactive.

I mailed it. Then I had a beer.

TWO days later, while I was bravely punching typewriter keys in a desperate effort to make good my boast, a small, haggard-looking fellow came to the door and rang the bell.

"We don't want any," I said.

He peered through the screen door and said, "I'm MacDonald," in a nervous, uncertain voice.

"MacDonald who?"

"Donald MacDonald. May I come in?"

"You're kidding. No, by God, you're not. You *are* Donald MacDonald."

He smiled wanly. "May I come in? I flew all the way—"

"Just to see me?"

"I—er—it was no trouble. I took a *skyorie*."

"A what?"

"May I come in?"

"Sure, sure, c'mon in. Have a chair. Drink?"

"No, thanks," he said, seating himself. "I'm afraid I've been—that is—er—No, I don't believe so."

"I got your letter," I said, suddenly remembering. My awe at the presence of the great man was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of "Now, what the hell does he want?"

"And I got yours," MacDonald



said. "That's why I'm here." He gazed at my typewriter as though it were ready to bite him. "You didn't take my advice?"

"Hardly," I said, rather flip-pantly. "Once the bug has bitten you—"

"Have you had anything accepted?"

I stared at the rug, hating the man for asking. "No, not yet," I admitted grudgingly, "but—"

"Then the bug hasn't *really* bitten you yet," he said. "You'll know it when he does."

"I—uh—guess my letter was a bit—er—abrupt," I said, not knowing how else to fill the silence.

"You were pretty mad," he admitted, "and I don't blame you; I should have known better than to tell you that way. But in this game, you've—well, you've got to learn to take criticism. If your work's bad, admit it and throw in the towel."

"And mine's bad?"

He shrugged, avoiding my eyes. "I'm afraid so."

But the steam had been released and the period of mourning had ended, so "I'll improve," I told him.

"You're wasting your time."

"Possibly. What I can't understand, though, is why a big name in science-fiction comes way the devil out here just to advise me to stop knocking my head against a wall."

"Perhaps more than your head is at stake," he said.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said hastily. For a moment his pale face held a haunted look, and he rose, looking like a man unsure of himself. "I can't talk you out of it, so I'd better go."

"Wait a minute. Just what did you mean by that other remark?"

Donald MacDonald glanced around him as though he were afraid invisible beings might be eaves-dropping. "You really want to know the reason why?"

I nodded.

"Your work is good," he said seriously. "Too good. Not up to par on some points, but in a few years you'll be going places. That's why I sneaked away from them and came here—to beg you to recon-sider, to stop this writing now, before it's too late."

"You mean—you *can't* mean—you're not—afraid of competition?"

He waved an annoyed hand. "Competition, hell! There's always room for more. You don't understand," he went on, screwing his face into a look of determination. "I'm trying to save your peace of mind, your sanity perhaps. The mind is a great and powerful thing, sometimes dangerous. All these things—these alien creatures that a science-fiction author creates—"

"Yes?"

But he had straightened suddenly, a look of terror on a face gone ashen. He went to the door like a man being pushed, fumbled

for the knob. "I beg of you, for your sake, forget it," he called back. Then he was gone.

I went out on the porch but MacDonald was not in sight. I heard a strange noise as of the flapping of great leathery wings. A shadow passed across the lawn. I looked up.

Nothing.

THE next morning I got a small envelope in the mail. The letter inside read, "Enclosed is a check for your story THE MONBEAST . . ." I sank into the softest chair in the world and read those wonderful, wonderful words, and held the check in my hand and read those wonderful, wonderful figures. I was so in a trance I hardly noticed the tiny decimal point that scamp-ered on tiny legs across the check. I hardly felt the small, sharp bite—but . . .

My first acceptance! It was incredible the exhilaration that flowed through me in that instant. It was like a much-needed shot of adrenalin, like cool springwater to a thirsty man. I had a check for a story someone thought enough of to publish. I was an author. A real, live, honest-to-goodness author with a check in my hand to prove to a critical world that I wasn't a bum after all. Suddenly the world was a big, wide, wonderful place to live in, and I loved everyone in it—even the poor, disillusioned Donald MacDonald.

But why stop here? I thought.

There were more checks where that came from. If I could sell one story, I could sell two, and then three, and four. So I did. In a way, it was something like digging my own grave. You don't understand that now, but in a little while you'll see the reason why.

AFTER I had haunted the news-stand for about three months, the great day came. THE MONBEAST was the last story in the magazine (at the time I thought they really should have featured it) and my name was misspelled on the contents page, but it was a great day just the same. A day of triumph. A day for rejoicing. I'd had several stories accepted during the several months' interval, but this was the day that the fruits of my labor became evident to the world.

I walked home with a proud, firm step, casually displaying the magazine to the vast public eye, to friend and foe alike. I tried to act nonchalant, as though this were old stuff to an established writer like me. It was a day of glory, of triumph, rivaling Caesar's victorious march into Rome.

That evening I read the story over and over again, marveling at the perfection of its form, savoring the exquisite flavor of each delicate, richly-hued, word, the uniqueness of each choice, well-turned phrase. I fell asleep with the magazine in my hand.

THE next morning the monbeast was sitting at the foot of my bed.

"Okay, okay," it said, blinking its bug-eyes at me, "don't act so surprised. MacDonald warned you, didn't he?"

"But—but—"

"Sure, I'm real," the monbeast volunteered, scratching its scaly head with a long-nailed finger. "That's the trouble with you guys. You're full of imagination, but you can't face reality."

"Where — where'd you come from?"

The monbeast shrugged massive green shoulders. "The whole thing's much too technical for me to worry about. All I know is us BEMs exist, and we get to your dimension via science-fiction."

"That 'power of mind' MacDonald was talking about?" I said, shuddering a bit.

"Something like that. Other forms of fiction deal with things native to your world. Science-fiction regards us BEMs as real, so while we don't ordinarily exist here, there's a stress created in the barrier between us, and we come through."

"Then you're really real?"

"Practically. Right now, though, you're the only one who can see and hear me. You haven't characterized me sufficiently so that the readers will be convinced that I'm real. But that's okay. You'll improve."

"Thanks. But now what about you?" I said, trying to not appear overanxious. "Are you returning to your own dimension or are you staying here for awhile?"

THE monbeast grinned, showing the eighty sharp-pointed teeth I knew it possessed. "Sorry, I'm here to stay. I'm your brainchild, you know, so I'll have to stick to you."

I gulped. "Stick to me?"

"Only figuratively," the monbeast said. "But I'll be around." He cocked a bug-eye at me and said gravely, "We'd better get a few things straight right from the start. One of them is that as far as you're concerned, I'm as real as that bedpost."

"Real?" I tried to laugh that off, but the sound came out a little weakly. "That's silly. You're just a product of my imagination."

"Am I?" the monbeast said.

He thrust the scaly face close to mine and yawned. Suddenly the room became a turkish bath.

"Okay, okay," I said hastily, "turn it off."

Coolness came, and I breathed easier as the steam dissipated.

"Secondly, you're going to create bigger and better BEMs and make them more convincing," the monbeast continued. "With all you writers turning us loose, we can have a swell time in this world."

"But how can you?" I protested. "You said the readers wouldn't be-

lieve in you, so you don't exist for them."

"Science-fiction is growing," the monbeast said. "Everyday more people are getting to realize that there is more to the world than those things they see around them. They believe what they read in love stories and detective stories. Science-fiction is next."

"Suppose I don't want to create more BEMs?" I said. "Suppose I take up saxophone playing or something and leave science-fiction alone."

"You can't stop writing it now, any more than a true fan can stop reading it. The bug has bitten you." He smiled a piano keyboard of teeth and continued, "Besides, I could be obliged to—er—inspire you just a bit. But you just work along with me, and we'll both do fine."

So we did.

**T**HE Monbeast isn't such a bad fellow after all, once you get to know him. Neither are the other BEMs hanging around my house. Oh, yes, there are others, lots of them. Hanging from the rafters. Under chairs. In coffee cups. Everywhere. It's an occupational hazard, you know.

Chances are, though, you would-

n't be able to see them — unless you're a real gone science-fiction fan, and even then maybe not. But someday you will.

Someday you'll be sitting in your favorite chair reading your favorite science-fiction magazine, and you'll look up . . .

Maybe it'll be sitting on the desk beside you, running one of four hands through a nest of snakes on its scaly head. Maybe it'll be only an inch tall and perched on the piano watching you. Maybe at first it'll be just a warm, dank breath on the back of your neck.

No telling *when* it'll be either. Maybe next year, next month; tomorrow. Who knows—perhaps even now.

Here's a little tip. When you lay down this magazine, turn around slowly. Have you ever had the feeling that something was going on behind your back but when you turned around you saw nothing? What's that? You think maybe you've got that feeling right now?

Listen, on second thought, now that you know, maybe you better not turn around. Take this as a gag. A nice big laugh. You'll be a lot better off that way.

What you don't know can't hurt you . . .

### FEATURED NEXT ISSUE:—

## TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL!

By DANIEL F. GALOUBE

You think there's nothing new in science fiction? You're in for a shock—and a pleasant one! Talented new writer Daniel F. Galoube presents a terrific novel in the great May issue—ON SALE THE FIRST WEEK IN MARCH!

# THE KILLER

*By J. J. Oliver*

**Smith made a profitable business out of murder. It was all quite simple—he killed a man and then disposed of the body—forever!**

THE sign on the door said Ernest H. Smith, Private Investigator. The door opened and a woman came in. She was a brunette, about five-feet-two, wearing a yellow dress with black buttons. She carried a brown alligator handbag. "I am Mrs. Wilma Rogers," she said. "You were recommended to me."

Smith motioned to a chair in front of his desk. "Sit down, Mrs. Rogers. Do you have a card?"

She sat down and opened her handbag. She took out a small card and handed it to him. He looked at the printed words, "Recommended to Smith." He opened a desk drawer and removed a small bottle of red liquid, spilling a few drops on the blank side of the card. Soon there was visible writing on it. "Okay for any service," it said.

"All right," Smith nodded, "what can I do for you?"

"I want you to kill my husband," she said pleasantly.

Smith swiveled his chair around to face the typewriter, inserted a blank sheet of white paper, and began to type. "Why do you want him killed?"

"He's stingy—he won't give me

enough money."

"How much money will he leave you, Mrs. Rogers?"

"Roughly two hundred thousand," she said. "There's insurance, of course, but I understand we can't count on that."

Smith smiled. "That's a nice sum. Now what time would be most convenient?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Any time suits me."

Smith laughed. "I mean for your husband. What time would be best for killing him?"

"Oh," she said. Her brow wrinkled and she began to mutter, "Let's see, now . . . home at five-fifteen, reads the paper . . . takes a shower . . . dinner at six-fifteen . . . I can send the servants out at seven-thirty . . . oh, I think eight will be perfect."

"Eight it is," said Smith, putting the information on paper. "Now for a bit of information about the house and grounds. Can't afford to bungle into the wrong place and foul up the job."

Mrs. Rogers opened her purse again and withdrew a folded sheet of paper. "I've got a floor-plan of the house here, with the address and

everything marked off."

Smith took the paper and looked at it. "You don't overlook anything, do you? Why didn't you just go ahead and do the job yourself?"

She smiled and shrugged. "I understand you can perform a perfect murder. I'm afraid I couldn't."

Smith removed the typewritten sheet from the machine and inserted a fresh sheet. He filled it in with names, dates, and figures. When he finished he handed it to her. "Sign on the bottom line."

She took the paper and looked at it.

"It's our contract," said Smith. "I have to have a guarantee that you'll go through with your part of the bargain. If you don't, I'll have that signed confession."

Mrs. Rogers looked at him in silence for a moment, then she laughed and signed the paper. "You don't overlook anything, yourself."

"No, Ma'am," said Smith.

AT exactly five minutes before eight, Smith drove his panel truck through the gate to the Rogers home, turned out the lights, and drove silently to the house. He parked near the side entrance, got out, went around the truck, which was labeled, "Smith's TV Repair," and opened the back doors. He lifted a pile of ragged quilts from the floor and picked up a small air-pistol. Wrapped carefully in the quilts was a tiny bottle of dark green liquid, marked "Poison." He took a small

dart from his pocket, opened the bottle and applied a small amount of the liquid to the tip of the projectile. Then he loaded the pistol with the dart, stuck it in his coat pocket, and replaced the bottle.

He walked rapidly to the door of the house, stopped at the steps to consult the floor plan, and then entered. He went up the stairs and directly to the second door on the left. He turned the knob silently and eased inside.

A small man, dressed in a dark suit, was seated at a desk, writing with a fountain pen on light blue paper. He looked up and said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Smith, the TV repairman—are you Rogers?"

"Yes, but I —"

Then Smith killed him.

HE emerged from the house with Rogers draped over his shoulder and staggered over to the truck. He shoved the corpse in and crawled in after. Moving rapidly, he opened the door of a trim metal cabinet directly behind the cab and shoved Rogers inside. Then he pushed a button on the side of the contraption and it began to hum.

After two minutes he cut the power and opened the cabinet. It was empty.

Smith whistled softly as he walked back to the house. He strode noisily in and called, "Hey, Mrs. Rogers!"

She emerged from a door near the

head of the stairs and came down. "Yes?" she said.

Smith grinned at her. "It's okay, lady—the job is over."

"Good! Let me fix you a drink, and you can tell me all about it."

Smith sat down on a couch. She prepared the drinks and brought his over. They sat together and sipped the liquor.

"Science is wonderful," she said.

"Yeah, it sure is," said Smith. "They spend millions figuring out fancy ways to catch crooks, and then some dumb professor invents a way so I can kill people and never be caught."

"I wonder what the cops a hundred years in the future will think when bodies start popping up all over the place?" she observed.

"Who cares?" said Smith. "I'm making my dough, even if I will have to wait seven years for the heirs to collect."

"It won't be too hard to wait," she said, "since we know for certain we'll get it."

"Let's drink to our success," Smith said.

"Let's," she smiled.

"Here's to a fine old professor, who invented a time machine and kindly let me kill him and take it away. Here's to a policeman's nightmare—the perfect murder."

They drank.

Smith got to his feet then and put the glass down. "Well, I've got to go now, I—"

He saw the blank look of astonishment on her face. Her mouth had dropped open and her eyes were wide, staring. But they weren't looking at him—they were looking *behind* him.

And then he heard the polite cough.

Smith spun around. He stared in amazement at the figure of a man standing there. A man clad in a strange shimmering metallic uniform. The man held an odd-looking weapon in his hand. He was smiling.

"Mr. Smith, I believe?"

Smith nodded automatically. "Yes, but who—"

"—am I?" the stranger completed the sentence for him. "It's quite simple. I'm Inspector Graevod, homicide. I'm arresting you for murder."

Smith shook his head dully. "But that's impossible. There's no murder—no body . . . Where did you come from?"

The shimmering man smiled pleasantly. "Oh but there is a body. Matter of fact there are quite a few. We've had quite a bit of difficulty in tracing you down. I've come all the way from 2035 to find you." He turned his eyes to the woman. "As an accessory to the fact you are also under arrest. Come along, both of you."

He pointed the strange weapon at them and a silver radiance swept from it to envelope their bodies.

But only for a moment. Then they were gone . . .





# RIDE THE CREPE RING

*By Milton Lesser*

**Norma thought it would be a great thrill to dodge the meteors in Saturn's forbidden Ring. A thrill yes—but would she live to enjoy it? . . .**

MIMAS was a cold little world where the sun's rays seldom reached. You stayed under a big glassite dome on the four-hundred mile sphere if you stayed there at all, and you hardly saw the sun anyway because Saturn and its rings were so big and so bright.

The temperature under the dome was kept in the forties because Mimas was a summer resort, provided you wanted to travel three quarters of a billion miles to leave the heat and the bustle of the inferior planets behind you.

It was cold, but Mr. S. Smith sweated. The S. was for Socrates, but everyone called him Smitty. Now he looked at his visitor and the sweat formed little glistening beads on his forehead. The man was short and stout with a bald head and a florid face. He looked silly next to Socrates Smith because Socrates stood six and a half feet tall without his space-boots, and he could have been a Martian bone bird for all the flesh on his body.

"That's the size of it, Smith," the

florid little man said. "We don't care if you *are* a billion miles from the sun —"

"Eight-hundred eighty-five million nine-hundred and sixty-three thousand and seventy-two," Socrates said proudly. "The most distant pleasure-spot in the Solar System. Want to get away from it all? Come to Mimas, with Saturn's rings right in your backyard . . ."

"That's it. We've had enough monkey business. Government was sued because it sanctioned your artificial satellite above Jupiter's Red Spot. The Red Spot Palace—bah! More people complained of asthma —"

"I included spacesuits with each domette, Mr. Farquhart. How did I know somebody sold me an inferior product?"

Farquhart shook his head. "None of my business. All your customers went to Mars to get rid of their asthma. Mars boomed, then overproduced. We had deflation, and the whole tourist business went to pot for three years. Why don't you try something simple like a spa on one

of the Venusian islands? I got a cousin —"

"Too crowded, too much competition. No, Mr. Farquhart, I have something different here. It'll make me a million. Then I can retire, buy me an estate on Ganymede and be out of your hair."

"It's not as simple as that, Smith. First I got to check this place. Is it safe? How do I know it's safe? Will you give phony asthma to ten thousand people again?"

**S**OCRATES still sweated, but he was all business now. "Of course it's safe. All my ships are war-surplus two-man cruisers, all twenty of them. You trust the Space Navy, don't you?"

"Naturally, naturally." Farquhart lit a cigar. "But what do you do with those ships?"

"We ride the rings, that's what we do. Only A and B, of course. The Saturnian Merrygoround, that's what we have here. Someone's a licensed pilot, I let him take a ship up himself. Otherwise I provide pilots."

"But is it safe?"

"You bet it's safe! And fun—it's terrific. The whole ring system is a hundred and seventy-one thousand miles across, a big merrygoround. Ten thousand miles of outer ring, sixteen thousand miles of bright ring—all to play in. Billions of meteors, and all the tourists have to do is dodge 'em. Great fun."

"I don't want to be a stick in the

mud, Mr. Smith, but, ah, what happens if someone doesn't dodge?"

"Not a chance. How could anyone miss? The ring-particles shine by reflected sunlight—you can see each one clear as hell, and you just avoid 'em, that's all. We don't go near the third ring, the crepe ring—not that dark baby. That could be dangerous. You know, the innermost ring, only seven thousand miles from Saturn itself. That's dark as the inside of a Plutonian catacomb. I thought of a resort there at first, but it's too damned far —"

Farquhart stood up. "Well, I don't want to take any more of your time. Tell you what I'll do, Smith. I'll stick around three, four days, and watch some of your tourists. I'll be fair about the whole thing—if it's safe, excellent: if not —" He shrugged. "You got quarters for me, Smith?"

Socrates started to tell him of the wonderful accommodations, thought better of it, checked on a domette vacancy, and gave Farquhart his key. "I'll see you," the short fat man said.

Socrates mopped his brow.

"CAN I come out now?"

Wearily, Socrates sat down. "Yes, come on. He's gone."

She was as tall for a girl as Socrates was for a man, and the long cascade of her golden hair didn't need sunlight to make it gleam. She was the prettiest thing in Mimas, and that included Socrates' glossy

new domettes. But it was because of her that he perspired.

"Please go away," he said. "Grow up in someone else's tourist haven, Norma, like a good girl. If you hadn't decided to see what was in the sponge grottoes of Callisto I'd still have my business there. If you hadn't —"

"Bygones are bygones, Smitty. That's a good boy. But not quite. I see your good friend Percival Farquhart is back —"

"Is that what the P. stands for? Percival, hah-hah."

"I wouldn't talk, *Socrates*. I wouldn't talk at all."

"Okay, okay. But look — there's a liner for Ceres tonight. I'll buy you a ticket. The Interplanetary Fair—"

"I already saw it. Stinks. Besides, I have a roundtrip ticket good for two years, so you don't have to buy me anything. You just mind your business, and I'll mind mine. All I want to do is ride the rings."

"Well, I'll take you up tonight. Then will you leave?"

"Hell, no. You're not taking me anywhere. Didn't you know I got my pilot's license?"

"Oh, no. Don't tell me it's come to that. They didn't give you a license!"

"Oh yes they did. Fifth try this year, and I finally made it. Nice young inspector, took me out to dinner afterwards. First they set his arm, but it wasn't my fault. Those damn asteroids can really pop up

out of nowhere. "Well, Smitty, which is my domette?"

Socrates sighed. He had no choice. If he didn't let her stay she'd make it her business to talk to Farquhart before she left. Then Farquhart would say the place was unsafe because she had a license. And yet Socrates wouldn't let her ride the rings. As simple as that.

He gave her a key. "Here. But do me a favor."

"What's that?"

"At least don't go up without letting me know. I want to be nearby. Please—"

She nodded and skipped out of the room, laughing.

Socrates knew that if you stayed in the two bright rings, and if you kept within the prescribed speed limit of three miles a second in the rings, you'd be all right. But not Norma. She'd hop her rockets to seven at the very least, and even though the sun blazed off each meteor in the rings with the reflecting brilliance of a beacon, she'd be sure to find some way to get into trouble—

Socrates wondered which would be better. If he murdered Norma her social set would bring every detective in the System to Mimas, and if he murdered Farquhart he'd have the government on his hands.

He drank a glass of Martian *thlo-mot* and looked in the mirror. His face was haggard. "You musn't think those thoughts, friend," he said. "This is the twenty-third century."

ON Monday he took up five tourists, and his half dozen pilots were equally busy. But everytime he came back he saw Farquhart at the port, like an undertaker, looking to see if anyone had been injured.

"You liked it?" he'd say. "Izatsow? Really liked it eh? Amazing—"

With dread, Socrates awaited the first space-sick tourist. That's all it would take: one. Farquhart would be more than happy to brand Mimas unsafe for tourists, Saturn's rings a hazard, and Mr. Socrates Smith a nincompoop. Maybe it was because his brother owned a spa on Venus. Or was it an exploratorium in the asteroid belt? His cousin?

But space was calm and remarkably free of ether-drift, and Socrates thought that maybe, just maybe, everything would turn out all right. Farquhart might leave, grumbling but satisfied, any day now. It all depended on Norma. If Farquhart left before Norma decided she was ready to ride the ring . . .

On Wednesday he spent six hours with Norma, dinner of a particularly succulent Venusian reptile, Martian white wine, Earth trimmings. They danced the archaic Mambo, which Socrates had revived after three hundred years, and which showed every indication of sweeping the System by storm. Surprisingly, Socrates had to admit to himself that he enjoyed the evening, if only because he knew he had kept Norma busy. That meant one more day and one more night in which she had not visited the

rings. It brought them one day closer to the time when Farquhart would leave.

But the kiss was different. He kissed her goodnight outside her domette and for a moment he forgot all about Farquhart. "I'll be damned," he said. "I liked it."

"Umm," she said, and they kissed again.

Socrates released her, turned around, and began to walk down the path through the artificial garden toward his own domette. She called after him.

"Thanks for a lovely evening, Smitty."

"Don't mention it."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"I think I'll ride the rings tomorrow. Well, goodnight."

Socrates tried to say goodnight, but only gurgles came out.

HE was at the spacefield early in the morning. Morning on Mimas was, of course, a relative term. It was morning on Mimas when the sun set, because then the great bulk of Saturn came up over the horizon and filled one third of the heavens, lighting the sky almost like the noonday sun on Earth, its great triple ring spanning the void almost from horizon to horizon.

The ring — and Norma wanted to ride it today! Socrates trembled a little when he thought of this, but he knew that for a time at least he could go about his business. He had

checked Norma's domette and she had not been there; but she had told him that she would not ride the rings without letting him know. That much at least he could be sure of — Norma would be as good as her word.

At the Administration Building, the Entwhistles awaited him. "Good morning," Socrates said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Morning?" This was Mrs. Entwhistle, big and round and overbearing. "How can it be morning? The sun just set."

Socrates explained to her, and then Mr. Entwhistle declared: "You must never argue with a man who knows, my dear. That's his business, and if he says it is morning, why then, it is morning."

"Well, who will it be?" Socrates said.

"Well —" Mr. Entwhistle began.

"Me," said Mrs. Entwhistle. "I want to go first because if it seems too strenuous to me then I won't send Arnold. Is it strenuous, Mr. Smith?"

"Uh-uh. You got a medical exam on the inner worlds which okayed you for outworld tourist travel. If you passed that you'll be fine here. Ready any time you are, Mrs. Entwhistle."

Mrs. Entwhistle turned white under the sunburn which she evidently had received on one of the Martian desert resorts. It was not uncommon: many of the tourists seemed afraid at first—after all, you took a

flimsy little two-seater and jockeyed it among the tiny motes of Saturn's rings. The word tiny, of course, could be confusing. Some of those motes could make a two-man cruiser look like a small speck of dust. If you didn't know how safe all that reflected sunlight was you'd be afraid. But the light was sufficient, and an alert pilot simply had to mind his business and you had nothing to worry about.

SOCRATES got into his vac suit rapidly and adjusted the glassite helmet over his head. He had the attendants bring an oversized suit for Mrs. Entwhistle, although he did not tell her that was the case at all. The vac suits represented the final precautionary measure. Any good pilot could avoid the larger chunks with ease, but once in a long long while a smaller particle might somehow elude the force-field which was there to protect against it, and the vac suit assured all tourists of a personal supply of air.

"All set, Mrs. Entwhistle?"

"Yes. Yes — only, you're sure it's safe?"

"I'd take my own wife—"

Mr. Entwhistle smiled. "You married? I didn't know you were married, Mr. Smith."

"He's not. Can't you see that he's not married, Arnold?"

"I'm not," Socrates admitted. "But I'd cheerfully take my own mother. You'll be safe, Mrs. Entwhistle."

Mrs. Entwhistle seemed a little taken aback by this remark, but her husband said, "Be careful, Gert-rude," and then they closed the faceplate on her glassite helmet.

Socrates switched on his radio. "Can you hear me, Mrs. Entwhistle?"

"Yes. Yes, I can. Better be careful, that's all I can say."

"Relax. We'll start now."

Mrs. Entwhistle was bulky in her vac suit, and two attendants had to help her through the narrow lock of the ship. After that Socrates saw to it that she was strapped securely into her seat, and her face looked peculiarly green under the lights of the instrument panel.

Socrates jumped outside to tell something to one of the attendants and he saw Farquhart there waiting for him.

"Hello, Smith. Nice day."

"Yeah. How's it coming? Your investigation, I mean."

"Surprisingly, fine. I'd say that if everything checks through with a clean bill of health today I'll be leaving on tomorrow morning's liner. If."

Perhaps Farquhart had not meant the if to sound so ominous, but it came out that way because Socrates immediately associated it with what Norma had said the night before. He smiled a bit weakly now and readjusted his helmet. Then he mumbled, "I'll see you on Ganymede in a few years," and he went back in through the lock

THEY cruised at fifteen miles a second, and within an hour they were passing under the outer ring. Automatically he lowered their speed.

Mrs. Entwhistle craned her neck upward, and through the top of her glassite helmet her face looked like a fish underwater. "I thought we go *in* the ring, Mr. Smith."

He nodded. "Of course we do. We're a thousand miles out now. See? If you look carefully, you probably can see some of the bigger particles shining."

"Um, yes."

"But we don't go in here. This is the outer ring and we pass under it. We also go under Cassini's Division — the dark band which separates this from the inner ring. I'll take you there, through the brighter ring, up to the border of the crepe one. But then we turn back. That would be dangerous."

"Why?"

"Because the crepe ring receives no sunlight. It's dark, that's why, and we'd have to rely on radar to keep the ship out of trouble. It's tricky business and it's dangerous. A little light flashes on and off and it tells you which way to steer, but unless you can see what you're doing — like you can in the bright ring, it's dangerous."

In another few minutes Socrates cut the ship sharply upward, and before long the solid whiteness of the ring had been replaced by a chaos of flying rock. That's what it looked like — huge boulders, ton

piled upon ton, and the closer they came, the faster the rocks seemed to move. In another moment the rocks were below as well as above them, and Mrs. Entwhistle screamed.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid. Please, Mr. Smith—"

"You have nothing to worry about —"

"I can't help it if I'm afraid. Take me back!"

Socrates turned sharply and the ship zoomed through an empty space. The rear port showed only a massive rock; it had been that close . . .

"If you don't keep quiet. Please—"

"Take me back!"

Socrates had had a few cases like this, and taking the customer back was comparatively simple. Although this bright ring was the largest, and although it did have a longitudinal width of sixteen thousand miles, its latitudinal depth was no more than ten miles. Now he gunned the ship up and in a moment they hung poised in deep space above the ring. "We'll stay clear of the ring and go back to Mimas—"

"Why?"

"You were afraid. You said so, that's why."

"Well, I changed my mind. What would all the girls on Earth say if they knew I hadn't actually seen the ring? Take me back, Mr. Smith. I'll be brave."

Socrates smiled. "That's a good girl," he said, and they dove again for the brightness of the ring. But he almost wished she hadn't changed

her mind. Then he could have returned to the spacefield and watched for Norma.

HE cut a zigzag course through the hurtling meteors. Someone, he knew, had once bothered to chart all the tiny particles of the ring, but it had taken a lifetime and it was far from accurate. Socrates preferred the seat-of-the-pants method.

In less than two hours they had cut through the width of the ring and ahead was darkness — darker, it seemed, than space itself.

"A thousand miles of void, and then the crepe ring," Socrates explained. "We'll be turning back now. Fun, Mrs. Entwhistle?"

"Great," she agreed, but she had taken off the fishbowl helmet, and now she was mopping her brow. "I must try it again sometime. In a few years, of course—"

Socrates jammed down on the rocket pedal and the fore-tubes blasted their fire against the blackness. The little ship shuddered and Mrs. Entwhistle emitted a sound which could have been the shrill shriek of a tea kettle. Then Socrates turned them slowly in a great arc so as not to harm the delicate two-hundred pound creature sitting by his side with too much acceleration.

Something flashed by beneath them. It could have been a meteor, except that this was a void area. Attraction of the planet Mimas, and the other satellites were such that no meteoric material could exist in this

space — which explained the thousand-mile separation of the crepe ring.

Yet something had passed them, something shining brilliantly with reflected sunlight.

A ship! It could have been nothing but a spaceship . . . Socrates knew he had the only ships in the area, but the crepe ring was out of bounds. The strange ship had been gunning for it at ten per—

Socrates barked into his radio:

"Hello, hello! Who's out here?"

The voice mocked him. "Who do you think?"

He didn't have to think at all, but he felt like crying. It was Norma. "I thought you'd tell me when you went!"

"I tried to, honest. But you weren't on Mimas, Smitty. So I took off. But don't worry. I've already been through the bright ring. Pretty nice setup, Smitty."

"I'm glad you like it. But you're heading in the wrong direction now." Ahead of them was the darkness which obscured part of Saturn's huge bulk — the darkness of the uncharted and mysterious crepe ring.

"What do you mean? Isn't this the way to the dark ring?"

"That's just it. Mimas is the other way."

"Oh, pooh. You go back to Mimas with your ship if you want. I'd rather see the inside of that dark ring. I'll say hello tonight, Smitty. Have a good trip back with Mrs. Entwhistle — I checked the tourist log."

Socrates called "Wait" into his radio at least a dozen times, but there was no answer.

Mrs. Entwhistle said, "Why is that crazy woman going into the crepe ring?"

Socrates sighed. If Norma got hurt now, his entire venture out here would be ruined. Farquhart would see to that. Besides, quite suddenly, he did not want Norma to get hurt. Not at all. Not ever. Maybe he was crazy — but he liked the girl.

"What," he demanded of Mrs. Entwhistle, "is wrong with the crepe ring?"

"Now, that's a silly question. You told me yourself it was dangerous. No one can see anything or some such thing—"

"Ha, ha, ha. I was joking. Good joke — but it's the best part of the trip. In fact, the trip is incomplete without it. I've saved it for last."

"So why are you trembling, Mr. Smith?"

"Nothing. It's nothing at all. Just get back into your helmet and I'll show you what the inside of the crepe ring is like. Go ahead, Mrs. Entwhistle. It isn't everyone who gets a chance to see the inside of the crepe ring . . ."

**T**HE darkness of space was pleasant by comparison. Here there were vague flitting shadows, the half-seen images of huge masses of rock and metal hurtling through space in their eternal revolution around Saturn. One would be more than enough



to crush their little ship — and Norma's . . .

Socrates hardly had time to think of it, hardly had time to hear Mrs. Entwhistle whimpering with each sudden burst of acceleration. On and off overhead the red and the green lights winked, and Socrates played on the firing pedals like an organist, trying to blast their way clear of the unseen rocks all about them. Once a yellow light winked and he knew that one of the meteoric pebbles had streaked through their ship: it now was an airless place, and only their flimsy spacesuits stood between them and the cold, beckoning void of space.

Someone was shouting, and at first he thought it was Mrs. Entwhistle . . . Norma!

"Hey, Smitty!"

"Yes. Yes, Norma."

"I can see you back there. See me?"

"Ahead a bit? Yeah, I see you."

Her ship flashed once and then was gone in the obscuring darkness, but it flashed again, and this time he probed out with a beam of radar and he held it.

"I'm glad you see me, Smitty, because I think you'll have to come and get me. I'm scared. My ship's a mess, gutted with holes. This place is — awful."

Socrates muttered to himself and pushed the aft pedals to the floor. Mrs. Entwhistle was slammed back in her seat and Socrates could see that she was trying to scream, only

she couldn't quite make it.

Only the green light flashed now, because the red-warning signal remained bright: it lit the way to Norma. A score of miles, but their zigzag course would make it more like several hundred — if they got there. Socrates' insides began to hurt from the acceleration. His feet were numb from working the pedals. Green light, step down, right, left, again, green, aft pedal, aft pedal! . . . Socrates soon realized that he was talking to himself.

**J**OINING air locks in space was at best a ticklish business, but with the added hazard of the meteors, Socrates did not know if it could be done. He only knew one thing. It *had* to be done. Norma's ship could have been a derelict for all the activity it showed, and while it had been pelted thus far only with smaller stones, one big rock would be more than enough to prove fatal.

They crept forward slowly, it seemed, inches at a time — and three times he had almost locked the two ships together, but at the last moment he had to swing away. The action would force the other ship back as well, and a massive chunk of cosmic debris would zoom through the void between them. Close . . .

He locked them together finally, and then, vaguely, he remembered running for the airlock. He found it, pulled the catch and opened Norma's lock from the outside. He stood for a moment within her ship.

She was slumped over the pilot chair in her spacesuit. He ran to her and lifted her across his shoulder, heading back for the lock. Then he was through it and Norma sat on the floor, partly conscious, in his own ship. He ran forward to the controls, pushing aside Mrs. Entwhistle — who had fallen across both chairs, breaking her strap in the process.

He fired all the aft rockets at once, blasting straight up towards the top of the ring.

In seconds they were clear, but not before he had seen a huge, almost spherical meteor grind into and through Norma's ship . . .

**B**OTH women were conscious when they reached the spaceport. Socrates smiled at Mrs. Entwhistle.

"Yes sir, you're a lucky young lady."

"Lucky? I feel almost dead."

"Ridiculous! You were the only tourist ever taken through that ring, the crepe ring. You'll be famous. Wait until you tell all your friends. I only took you because you seemed so obviously brave . . ."

"Go ahead," Norma chided, "pile it on, pile it on—"

Socrates told her, in his severest tones, that he'd get to her later. After that, he was busy bringing the little ship down on Mimas' one spacefield.

Mr. Entwhistle and Farquhart met them when they landed. The smaller, thinner man seemed worried, but

now he took his wife's hand and asked her, "How did you like it?"

Socrates waited breathlessly. If Farquhart found out . . .

"I loved it!" Mrs. Entwhistle fairly shrieked. "Wait until you hear, Arnold — and wait until we get back to Earth. "We'll leave at once, on tomorrow's liner. After I tell Aunt Sophie—"

"See?" Socrates turned to Farquhart.

"Um, I must admit it looks good this time, Smith. What about you, Miss?"

Norma grinned. "I had quite a time, quite a time. *My* ship —"

Socrates kissed her soundly on the lips, and whatever else she might have said was lost in the hurried smacking sound.

Farquhart cleared his throat. "I never knew you took two passengers up at once, Smith. And I didn't see her before—"

"She's here, isn't she?"

"Umm—"

"You never know what we'll do here on Mimas . . ."

"Umm, well — I guess you're in order this time, Smith. Good luck."

Norma said, "My ship—"

Socrates kissed her again. Then he said, "If you don't shut up I think I'll have to marry you. That's exactly what I'll have to do . . ."

Norma's eyes glowed at him. "As I was saying, darling, *our* ship . . ."

This time she was kissing him.

# Immortality ?

SECOND only to the wonders of physics are those of biology—and the future will see the latter overtaking the former. The greatest mystery of all is life—and we know the least about it. Curiously enough the starting point for learning more is not in Man but in plants.

Right now the botanists and biologists are working on the age-old problem of photo-synthesis — how does chlorophyll convert the sun's light into chemical energy? The latest work discloses that there is

some other unknown agent in the picture. When this is isolated we stand a good chance of really understanding how photosynthesis operates. That in turn will give us a clue to how the complex chemistry of the body works—and then maybe we'll find out about life.

With science lengthening the life-span constantly, it is not absurd to hope that someday, though immortality itself may not be attained, we will reach the point where our present length of life is a mere childhood.

## Good-by Wood...

WOOD, in this age of metals, is still a versatile medium for building things, and even in a world of jets, atomic bombs and rockets, has a mighty useful place.

But in twenty years, natural wood, in planks and boards, will be as dead as a dodo! Instead, plywoods and compressed woods made of sawdust mixed with plastics will be the order of the day. Already such products are taking the place of sawed boards and the trend will accelerate; that is unquestionable.

There is no wastage in "manufactured wood"; it is stronger, it looks better, and it is easier to use. This whole tendency to substitute synthetic materials, ranging from rubber, through wood and textiles to ceramics, is a healthy sign for the preservation of a high living standard in the future as well as the present despite the increase in population and individual well-being.

## Machine vs. Man

A HOTLY contested struggle is being waged in the mathematical world and it concerns—of all things—chess playing machines!

One school believes that mechanical-electrical chess players can be built eventually, which will be capable of defeating any human, no matter how skilled. The opponents think otherwise, insisting Man is preeminent.

Only time will determine who is right, but it would seem that the builders of the machines are certainly their masters. Despite the wonderful capabilities of machines surely they aren't better than the miraculous brain that designed them!

On the other hand just as vehement an argument can be maintained for the machine which may have a built-in learning system. Whatever happens it's a sad thought that the question can even arise!



They had only known the lower chambers. Now suddenly a great vista unfolded before them. It was terrifying — and wonderful



# REBIRTH

*By*

*Daniel F. Galouye*

**Larna sang a strange song telling of stars  
and other unknown things. But Maron knew only  
the dark caverns in which they fought and died!**

**W**ITH surefooted strides, Maron raced forward. His stout thigh muscles pumped in supple rhythm and his ears tingled with the delicate harmony of deep bass and shrill treble notes that sounded ahead and reverberated from behind and around him.

But it was not so much the artificial tones to which he listened as it was the familiar, plaintive voice of the girl.

The way narrowed and he slowed to maintain footing on the covering of small, scattered stones. Ahead,

just beyond the tricky section of the path, was the origin of the sound.

Now the singing came clearer, unaffected by reflection against damp walls and by belated echoes that set up discordant counter-strains.

The song and its weird background music stopped abruptly and for an indecisive second he stood motionless on the now smooth path.

"It's Maron, isn't it?" the girl called out, her voice barely more than a whisper. There was no surprise, no eagerness in the question. He found only the solicitude he had

suspected would be there.

Without answering, he walked forward slowly. The music continued as she resumed striking the thin stones with her hands. She was certain it was he now, Maron knew. And he had had no doubt as to the identity of the girl whose deft fingers filled the chamber with beautiful sound. He would have recognized her even if the music stones had been silent. He felt thankful that men were more adept at ferreting out scents.

The strains welled, drowning out the girl's voice—swelled toward a climactic fury. The sound expanded to deafening proportions, admitting a dissonant note, then another, a prelude to the coarse discord which he knew would soon plunge the chamber back to its grim silence.

He stood next to her side, the stones' vibrations smiting his ears, and braced himself against the impact of the expected discord. It came. He had not steeled himself sufficiently and he trembled.

THE silence was sepulchral.

It was broken only by the girl's heavy breathing.

"Why have you come here?" her voice cringed in contrast to the vehement notes that still seemed to chase one another from distant wall to distant wall in an orgy of lost sound.

He grasped her shoulder. Then his other hand touched her forehead tenderly, traced the smooth curve of

her brow, the fingertip-size depression at the bridge of her nose, and moved on to her lips. He trembled as his fingers caressed her small pointed chin and brushed across the lean texture of her neck.

"I come to hear it from you," he clutched her arms, but relaxed the grip when he realized he was hurting her.

"Our chief has told you then!" she moved backward, distress in her voice.

"Yes, my father told me!" he shouted reproachfully, his fist flailing sideways to strike one of the music rocks hanging from the ceiling. Then there was restraint in his voice.

"But you mustn't, Larna!" he pleaded. "You have never been in the Upper Level! You do not know what it is like up there. Their pits are more treacherous and more numerous. There are no music stones. And their pool is not as large . . ."

"I have made up my mind," her voice shook with forced determination.

". . . And Artok will not make a good mate. He is cruel! They are all cruel!"

The girl was silent. He listened sharply to determine whether his plea was having any effect.

"What did my father tell you?" his voice rose again. "Did he rant again about the fearsome power of the Upper Level people? Did he say that if we fight there will be fewer and fewer of us? Did he . . ."

"Paral told me nothing," Larna spoke softly but rapidly. "He did not need to tell me anything. Everybody knows Artok wants me for a mate. They know the people will be one again if I . . ."

**M**ARON rammed a fist into his palm. "They are wrong, Larna! They do not know Artok and his people as I do. Kinship by mating will make no difference with him. He is a thief and a murderer! And he will always be a thief and a murderer! He . . ."

He stopped abruptly; held the girl's shoulders again.

"You do love me, don't you?" he whispered.

She did not answer.

"Say it, Larna! Say that you love me!"

The sob was not fully born. It remained in her throat. But he heard it. There were few sounds that escaped him, he knew, and one that he would be listening for would not be among them.

She pressed against him and he tightened his arms around her.

"Larna," he whispered. "There are other chambers. There are chambers our people have never been in before. There are rooms even I have never entered. We could pick one far away. It would not take us long to learn it."

A warm tear transferred itself from her cheek to his.

"No, Maron," a tremor shook her body. "It must be this way. It must

all be for the benefit of our people. There are so few left. And . . ."

"But, Larna!" he protested. "The legends! The . . ."

"They are without base, Maron," her head shook against him. "They say that at one time people used to think about a heaven—a place to go after they die. The legends would have us believe there is a better place to go—even while we are alive. If I had to choose between the two beliefs, I would prefer the heaven."

She moved away again. There was a moment of silence. Then the music started, dolefully. He leaned against a rock, dispiritedly.

The voice now was louder than the restrained music.

*"See the Shining Stars Above  
Lighting up My Eyes With Love."*

"Why must you dwell on songs that are so mysterious?" he asked.

The music continued while she answered absently. "It is the song of my mother and my grandmother. In my grandmother's time, it was taboo. But when people suddenly realized they did not know why, nobody seemed to mind if I sang it."

"But the words, Larna!" he protested. "What do they mean—*See . . . Shining . . . Stars . . . Eyes?*"

She stopped playing again. "Maron — Soon I shall cut my hair for the second time. And with it I shall weave my next garment. And then . . . Maron, will you miss me? Who will you pick for a mate?"

His temples throbbed and he felt

anger surge through him. "I will pick no one! I will settle for none less than you—you and the legends—true or false!"

**H**E clenched his fists and raced around the girl and down the passage. Sidestepping strewn boulders, he slowed only when the incline steepened. He fled past the mushroom garden and the profusion of fungus growth beyond. When the ascending path leveled, he halted abruptly and stood with his broad chest heaving.

"Artok!" his voice boomed through the chambers and passages of the Upper Level. And it crashed back at him again and again until it trailed off into silence: "Artok . . . Artok . . . Artok . . ."

"Maron is waiting at the climb!" he shouted. "Chief of the Upper Level, produce yourself! Or do you hide?"

He tensed, his nostrils quivering for a sign of approach and his ears straining toward the main passage of the Top Level.

It was the sound that brought evidence first. But only seconds later the unmistakable scent of Upper Level life was wafted to him. It was the distinctive scent of Artok!

Muscles standing out in ridges on his shoulders and arms, he traced the approach with his ears. The odor was stronger now and the sound was closer—much closer. He listened to the almost imperceptible noises made by the oncoming, cautious

step. A stone turned over under pressure of a foot. There was no attendant sound, but vibrations found their way into his tightened leg muscles and he brought up his arms, fingers spread tensely.

Then the advance halted. Maron forced himself to breathe slower, realizing that the rush of air to his lungs was leading Artok directly to him. He rebuked himself for having failed to take into account the other's more experienced senses.

"Bottom Level scum!" Artok's deep voice exploded close to Maron's face. "What mission of trespass does the chief send his boy on now?"

Maron stepped forward hesitatingly, his teeth clamped together.

"I do not trespass!" he shouted back. But his voice was not as deep as the other's and did not set the slender hanging stones ringing as forcibly. "The Upper Level is not yours!"

"You would contest my people's possession here?" Artok scorned.

"There is no great power that has said, 'Artok, the Upper Level is yours; Paral, your people must live below'."

The gruff laugh was challenging. "So, Maron, the upstart of the dying people's chief, is here to take the Upper Level away from Artok—alone—with no help."

Maron waited until the siege of derision was over, fighting down the inner voice that suggested fear of the more experienced and fearsome leader from above. He had felt the



huge chief once. That was more than five rises ago of the river that ran through the Lower Level. And he yet well remembered the bulging biceps, the ridged back. But that was when Maron was but a boy, he suggested encouragingly to himself. And now he was a man. He had long since then taken the first cutting of his hair for the weavers.

Recklessly casting aside the calming influence of his apprehension, he drew strength from a resurgence of rage as he listened to Artok's caustic laughter.

The Upper Level chief drew in a deep breath and the rushing noise sounded like a wind in the hollow enclosure.

"Weakling!" Artok hurled contemptuously. "Have the women fitted you out for your first loincloth yet?"

Maron's chest muscles tightened. "You would seek one of the Lower Level scum," his voice now matched Artok's in volume. "for a mate after you have already killed your first mate."

The answering snort told him he had scored. "My father," he continued, "is on his knees before you. But soon I shall head my people. Then there will be no more robbing of our mushroom and fungus beds and the fish from our stream. Our nets of hair will be safe on their racks once more . . ."

**H**E stopped suddenly, cocking his head. Maron realized he

had spoken too loud and too long. There were others in the passage now and his ranting had provided the camouflage for their stealthy advance! He could not guess how many—perhaps three, perhaps four.

Freezing in his position and stifling his breathing, he wished for some means to halt the position-betraying scent emanating from his body.

The noise sounded on his left, close. A foot had moved a stone, producing a sound that could be made only when a person had sprung from the ground. He dodged instinctively—but not quick enough!

An outstretched hand caught his hair and tightened in a firm grip. The force of the flying body jolted him over backwards. He reached for the assailant, but a corded arm gripped his neck and a knee crashed into his back. As he fell, another Upper Level tribesman's arm reached out, touched his shoulder and measured the distance to his face automatically. A fist pounded against his temple.

Maron made bludgeons of his hands and flailed them about wildly above him. One of the fists struck an assailant solidly in the chest and sent him reeling, but only momentarily. The trio was suddenly upon him and his arms were pinned to the ground. He struggled, but could not break free. Then fists pounded cruelly into his face and body.

When he became limp they released him. In half-consciousness,

he became vaguely aware of the scent of the trio growing weak. Artok's odor loomed stronger.

The chief laughed again, the sound coming from almost directly above Maron. A hand reached down, grasped his hair and jerked him roughly to his feet.

"Tell Paral what happened," Artok shouted. "Tell him you were caught trespassing. Tell him you broke our agreement."

Maron's chest heaved as he strove to draw air into his burning lungs. Then the fist smashed into his face. As he fell once more he felt blood gush from a battered nose and minced lips.

He rolled over onto the slope of the incline. Then, arms and legs flailing uncontrollably, he was cartwheeling down the ramp. Where the passage turned his body struck a boulder and caromed off the path. He was only dimly conscious of the soft earth of the mushroom patch as his weight crushed the fluffy plants. He crashed through the bed, rolled several feet beyond and into another large rock. The impact robbed him of all his senses.

"Maron! Maron!" Larna's voice wedged itself hazily into his returning consciousness. "Where are you?"

He tried to call back. But there was only a groan.

Then her hand reached out and touched his chest. She gasped.

"You should not have come to the incline," her voice tensed, but the sobs did not come. "You must never

go past the fungus patch again," she begged. "Promise me!"

Maron rose on an elbow. "I will kill him," he whispered hoarsely. "You will never become his mate! I will kill him!"

## CHAPTER II

WHERE the waters from the bubbling, hot springs mixed with the cold stream of the Lower Level, Maron bathed his wounds and rinsed the blood from his mouth. Then he eased his body into the tepid, shallow water and relaxed, letting the soreness seep out of his aching limbs. But the comfort soon brought drowsiness and he went to the Lower Level sleeping area, selecting a spot well downwind from the others so the smell of any additional bleeding would not arouse curiosity.

He must have slept for almost the duration of the slumber period, for when he awoke the sound of splashing in the pool filled the chamber. That sound and another—the excited voice of a boy.

"Maron! Wake up!" It was Larna's small brother.

"What is it, Sarka?" he inquired, rising.

"Larna has not slept this period. She has been sad and she has told me she will go to join the people—above. Maron, you must not let her go! She will listen only to you!"

He placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I have shown you the

little-known passages, Sarka. You are like my brother . . . I swear to you Larna shall not become one of the Upper Level people!"

He tightened his grip on the lad's shoulder. "Perhaps," he continued, as they walked toward the pool, "you may not be with your sister again—nor me. But she will not be above . . . Only you will know this, Sarka. I go to find another chamber."

They were at the pool. The youth bolted for the water, but Maron grabbed his arm.

"You will say nothing to anybody," he instructed.

"Nothing," Sarka promised solemnly.

**M**ARON went immediately to the pit where the hot water bubbled from the floor. He knew he must hurry, for the women would soon be coming to withdraw their boiling food for the first meal of the wakeful period. Feeling along the edge of the pit, his fingers contacted a soft cord of braided hair. He pulled it from the water and untied the hot, mushroom-stuffed fish. After waving it in the air until it was cool, he thrust it partly under his loincloth.

Then the chattering voices of the tribespeople grew loud in their approach.

"Maron," he heard Larna call out. Going over to her, he drew the girl away from the crowd. He led her to the mouth of one of the pas-

sages at the end of the chamber. As they stopped, her hand brushed against his waist.

"Maron!" she exclaimed. "You are leaving the chamber!"

"But I shall be back," he grasped her shoulders.

"You are not going to—to the Upper Level?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"No, Larna," he lied, for he knew that all passages led first to the higher regions before continuing elsewhere. "I go to find another chamber—one where we shall be safe from—"

"There are no chambers where our people will be safe."

"That is but a myth. Artok's people are not so all-powerful, so all-knowing."

"But would the ones of the Lower Chamber be willing to leave here?" she asked excitedly. But the hope faded from her voice. "No, Maron, they would not. Our dead are buried here. They would not wish to go elsewhere."

"I do not care what they wish," he said gruffly. "I plan only for you and me."

She gasped. "You have no right to make plans that would not include those you would leave at the mercy of the Upper Level!"

"You will go with me when I find the place." His voice was demanding.

For a long while she did not answer. Then he heard the pent air escape from her chest. "No, Maron."

She took his hands from her shoulders.

"You will change your mind, Lar-na," he called out after her, "when I bring you there."

ONLY a few hundred feet from the chamber, the passage curved upward sharply. And he slowed his pace and breathed carefully so there would be no sound. Soon he would enter the Upper Level's main chamber and he must be cautious.

The passage leveled and he extended an arm outward while walking to touch the low-hanging stone at its mouth. Then he stopped abruptly and stiffened. There were voices ahead! Upper Level men—hostile men—were congregated somewhere in the end of the chamber through which he must pass!

Suddenly he realized he could not catch their scent because the breeze was from his rear. The same air stream, he reasoned further, would be carrying his odor toward the men. He could not remain where he stood. The passage from the Upper Chamber that he sought was only a few feet away. He decided on a dash across the distance.

In a cautious trot, he raced forward, careful that his feet should add no further evidence to his presence. Then, as he stooped to enter the smaller, tunnel-like way, the voices stopped. He increased his pace.

His leg brushed against a boulder and a little further on his hair

was ruffled by an outcropping of rock. Realizing his memory of the passage was not as sharp as he had expected it would be, he slowed pace.

The scent of the men, carried by the rearward wind, continued to assail his nostrils. He was aware suddenly that it was becoming stronger! Abandoning caution, he fled through the remaining length of the short passage and broke into the chamber of intermingling winds, one of the areas that was forbidden by the age-old laws of the levels.

Maron hesitated momentarily in the small room while he called on his memory for the safest passage out. Then he selected one on the right, into which the winds rushed with a swiftness that would destroy his scent immediately. He entered it slowly, bemoaning his elusive memory of the way.

Occasionally he had to extend a hand when he wasn't sure of the position of a boulder; or he had to stop and feel the ground with his toes to cross-check his memory of the location of a pit. Suddenly he was aware the pursuing scent was no longer in the air.

The passage turned right and he entered a small chamber. Here he stopped to rest. He had never been this far from the home of his people and he wondered whether anyone else had. The idea appealed to his curiosity and he decided to find out. Starting at one wall of the room, he swept his fingers slowly across

the floor. For several feet the surface was undisturbed. Then his hand came to an area where there had been distinct trampling by many feet. He explored the depressions. They were not made by feet! There were no toe prints!

The space between steps, however, was of normal length. Those who had walked here, he surmised, were humans whose feet had been covered with something hard—oval shaped. The group had gone in the direction from which he had come. He was further convinced the tracks had all been made at the same time, for the dust that had settled to round out the sharp edges of the prints was of the same thickness in each impression.

**P**UZZLED, he stood absently over the tracks, continuing to explore them with his toes. Then he walked forward, following the depressions in the direction from which they had come. His feet scuffed out a head of him and swept sideways from time to time to ascertain whether he was staying in the center of the line of tracks.

Walking with a protective arm stretched forward and up, Maron wondered how long ago the group had passed here. He could not place the intervening time at less than several generations. The fine dust in the prints told him that. He guessed at the number in the group, surmising they had outnumbered the combined peoples of the Lower and

Upper Levels.

Suddenly his foot struck a rock and he fell forward—onto a pile of loose stones. He picked himself up, bewildered. The footprints had ended at the base of the rocks. He explored the pile with his hands. It stretched from one side of the passage to the other and from the floor, in sloping ascent, to the ceiling.

Then he realized what had happened: There had been a cave-in sometime after the group had passed. But had there? He had encountered other cave-ins. In all cases, the results were huge boulders strewn about the floor. In this case, there were no large rocks.

Shrugging away the perplexity, he sat on the pile and ate his fish and mushrooms. But before he finished he leaped up, realizing suddenly that the swift stream of air which had been with him when he entered this passage was no longer in evidence. He had lost it somewhere along the way—where it had entered another passage—and he had not noticed the exact place. Air streams, he remembered, lead to chambers—the stronger the stream, the larger the chamber. And a large chamber was the object of his search, rather than a pile of loose stones blocking a passageway.

He tossed the remainder of the fish away, reached onto the stone pile and found two pebbles that fit easily into his partially closed palm. Shaking his hand, he tested them for sound. The clatter was strong

and clear. He turned his back to the pile and clicked the stones.

The passage that stretched away was clearly impressed on his mind now through the echoes that bounced back at him. From the walls on each side there was an almost instantaneous return. Belated echoes from directly ahead marked off the receding reaches of the tunnel. He studied the almost smooth ceiling, picked out the sounds that informed him of the conical stones hanging near the side of the passage. He listened to the hollow reflections from false passages extending into the walls and from pits that bored down into the floor.

The pebbles made good sounds—perhaps not quite as sharp as the ones he had left in the Lower Level, but sharp enough to suit his purpose and provide him with means of more rapid passage.

His progress back was swift as he clicked the stones in time with his steps. He came upon the side passage which he sought with a suddenness that surprised him.

### CHAPTER III

**E**NTERING the windy tunnel, Maron did not slow his pace, but he altered the rhythm of the stones to afford greater caution. The new way was not different from the usual passage. There were the expected dips, occasional low-hanging stones, crevasses and hazardous pits.

Suddenly there were voices!

He listened intently. Not voices, but a single voice. One that creaked with age as it addressed and answered itself. One that belonged to no one in either the Upper or Lower Level. The incessant chatter continued.

Beyond the voice came the strong sound of falling water. Maron was thankful for the noise that would drown out the sound of his click-stones.

He stepped forward gingerly, but stopped again, almost immediately. Concerned over the echoes he was receiving from his pebbles, he twisted his head in several directions to interpret them.

A great pit directly ahead. Water at its bottom . . . He could tell that by the muted sound that rebounded from the depths. The pit stretched completely across the way. He inclined his ear toward the walls. There were no ridges that would provide alternate passage. Decreasing the frequency of his clicks, he ascertained the width of the pit to be at least twenty paces—much too wide for a leap.

Then he was aware of the barely perceptible echo that indicated a small ridge spanning the chasm across its center. He reached out with his toe and found it—a thin slab that extended back along the floor and forward over the pit. He considered not hazarding a crossing, but curiosity over the stranger was in command of his will, so he stepped carefully onto the stone. It

was many paces below to the water, his pebbles told him, and the sides of the pit were treacherous with outcroppings of jagged stones.

HE took two cautious steps; waited, then took two more. The slab seemed solidly set over the pit, so he proceeded. Halfway across, he stopped, trembling. Had he detected a motion in the stone? Had there been a slight shift? For a moment he waited. Then he stepped forward once more.

The rock was moving! The end ahead of him was tilting down—faster! The slab had not spanned the pit as he had suspected. He felt the movement gather momentum. Within a second he would be plunging down with the rock, smashing against the murderous sides of the pit—only to land in the water with the huge boulder falling on top of him.

He bent his knees and sprang, using the slab as an anchor. Then he was sailing forward, his arms flailing, hands ready to clutch. For an agonizing second that was an eternity, he touched nothing. Had the stone tilted so much that the spring he had gotten had only increased his speed in a plunge to the depths? Or had he succeeded in propelling himself toward the opposite edge? In that endless second he screamed his anguish.

Then his fingers encountered something solid and he grasped it. Next, his body, pivoting under the

anchored hands, struck flat against the rough side of the pit. He had gripped the opposite edge!

Maron hung on, perspiring. His toes found protruding rocks and held them tenaciously. Panting, he supported his weight on two feet and a hand while he reached over the edge of the pit and felt the smooth floor. There was nothing to which he could grab to hoist himself to safety!

Suddenly his groping hand found something soft—an ankle! It was protruding over the edge! He grabbed it desperately.

"Pull yourself up," the aged voice said. "I do not have the strength to help you."

Maron held tightly to the leg, afraid to put his weight on it—fearful the weight might pull his rescuer into the pit with him.

"Pull up!" the voice repeated. "I'm stuck between two stalagmites."

MARON secured his grasp on the ankle. Then he pulled his body over the rim and lay exhausted.

"For a lifetime," the other said after a weak hackle, "I've wondered whether that slab would be safe . . ."

"Why didn't you warn me?" Maron panted.

"Didn't hear," the other said curtly. "If I had I would have told you about the side passage. It goes around the pit. Hidden behind a group of stalactites."

"Stalactites . . . ?" Maron repeat-

ed quizzically. "And that other word—sta . . ."

"Stalagmites? — That's the rocks coming up from the floor. The others are hanging rocks."

"Who are you?" Maron asked suddenly, breathing easier.

There was a long silence. Then the voice cracked pensively, "I guess I used to have a name . . . But—but I don't remember it!"

Maron grasped a thin arm as he and the other rose from the floor. "Is this another level? Are there other people here?"

"No, there is no one else. I have lived by myself since my father's father died." Then the laugh sounded again. "Another level! Then there are levels now, are there? The people do not live together any longer . . . Tell me, son, the people on the levels—they don't like each other, do they? They are jealous of what each other has? They fight?"

"You have been speaking with the Upper Level people," Maron accused.

"I have not been out of this chamber since I was a child."

**M**ARON extended a hand and touched the man's face, felt the deep wrinkles, passed over the sucked-in cheeks, the thick beard whose end he could not reach. Then he moved backward. This man was old—very old—more aged than anyone he had ever known!

"And the people still fight," the chuckle sounded again. "Grandfather

always said they could murder us; make us grovel like the insects—yet there would be no end to ambitions and conflict. Nothing, he always said, nothing could weld them together."

"What do your crazy words mean?" Maron demanded. "You speak in silly riddles!"

"You see . . ." the other began.

"*See!*—You use the same word that Larna sings in her song! Where did you learn it?"

"It is something my grandfather taught me. It means to—understand. But it also means something else. He tried to explain it, but it was no use . . . That was why he took me to this chamber. The other old Ones did not want him to talk about such things. The Last Ones had agreed not to talk about them—ever . . . Then we ran away—just him and me. We never went back. And I still do not know what the word really means, although he spent the rest of his life trying to explain it."

"You did not come here because you wanted to," Maron laughed. "The people chased you away because you were crazy."

"I am not crazy," the old one insisted. "Grandfather said that when we get outside we will learn what . . ."

"*Get outside?*—What is that?"

"Why, outside—outside these chambers."

"Outside the chambers are passages."

"No. No. Outside the chambers



and outside the passages too."

"Only the rocks," Maron sighed, "are outside both."

THE aged one sighed also and sat down. "You can understand it no better than I. Grandfather warned that I should never speak of it with anyone . . . Look . . ."

"Another unheard of word!" Maron complained. "What does *it* mean?"

"Why, it's something like *see*. Grandfather says you do it with . . ."

Bony fingers touched Maron's cheeks, withdrew; approached again, and touched his eyelids. Maron jerked his head back.

". . . These—your eyes," said the other.

"You *see* and *look* with the cryers?" Maron asked incredulously.

"That's what grandfather used to say. He used to tell me, 'My boy, have you never stopped to wonder that you may have more than four senses? That, besides the senses of feeling, tasting, touching and hearing there might be yet another way to be aware of what goes on around you?'"

"When I would answer no, he would become disgusted and say, 'Well, there is! If only we could go outside I would show you!' Then I would start asking him to explain the word *show*."

"Old one," Maron became impatient. "I cannot stand here and listen to your meaningless chatter. I

am thankful to you for saving my life. But I am looking for a suitable dwelling chamber for myself and my mate. And . . ."

"You may soon have this one. I won't need it much longer. And there are fish and fungus and sweet water . . ."

Maron stopped him, ". . . And pits so deep there aren't any bottoms. You can keep it for yourself!"

He stopped and groped on the floor. Finding a pair of pebbles to replace the ones he had dropped in the pit, he called on the hermit to show him the hidden tunnel that would take him around the pit.

UPPER Level scents were strong in his nostrils when he tossed away the click-stones and prepared to cross the corner of their chamber to return to his own regions. It was too strong, he decided, as he stood motionless near the mouth of the passage and strained his ears to catch the sound of possible nearby breathing.

Then he heard voices well within the chamber. Estimating their distance, he decided he could successfully reach the passage leading downward to his own people. Of course, they would catch his scent as he headed into the other tunnel. They might even detect the sounds of his running. But before they could move in pursuit, he would already be back in the room below.

He sprinted into the chamber and streaked for the other opening. When

he had almost reached the passage, he sensed the inconsistency. The voices had become quiet. And although he could still detect the presence of their owners, there was the stronger, closer odors of others—persons so close he could almost touch them. They had set a trap; had posted guards in this niche of their chamber. When he had hesitated at the mouth of the tunnel, he realized, a prepared conversation by two men farther in the chamber was set off to make him believe the odors he smelled were those of the two.

Maron burst out of the passage and sprinted across the chamber for the asylum offered by the yawning tunnel ahead. Then his knee hit a rock barrier that had not been there before and he slammed forward, crashing into the rough wall near the opening.

Before he could rise, arms encircled his body, pinning his fists to his sides. He lurched again and again to free himself, but his struggles were futile.

“WELL,” Artok’s tough feet crunched against stones as he walked back and forth. “So the meddler from below chooses to ignore the agreement and trespass regardless of warnings?”

Maron tried to wrench loose from the men who held his arms, but could not. One of them slipped a loop around his right wrist.

“What is it you seek here, up-

start? Do you attempt to overhear conversation?” Artok’s voice was becoming increasingly harsh. “What has your eavesdropping gained you?”

Maron did not answer. He was turned around abruptly so that his back was to the chief. The hairwoven rope that held his hand was secured to one of the hanging rocks. Another rope was slipped around his left hand and was tied to a second suspended stone. Then his captors released him. He strained fiercely against his bonds, but his efforts were futile.

“He is secure in position, Artok,” one of the men snapped.

“Again, Maron,” the chief shouted. “What is it you seek?”

“Perhaps it is a mate, like you seek from our chamber,” he twisted his head over his shoulders and filled his voice with scorn.

A rageful snort came from Artok.

“But I would have none of your women,” Maron could not control his spite. “You can keep your sickly girls, starved to the bone so the food will be saved to make fighters out of men!”

“Scum of the depths!” Artok roared. “You will tell me why you trespass before I am through with you!”

Maron’s sensitive ears picked up the whining swish in the air before the rope laid open a curved line across his back. He winced and twisted his body, but he did not cry out. The Upper Level had found

an additional use for hair—braided, it made a frightful weapon if you tied the sharp pebbles in it at the right distance apart.

The whip cracked repeatedly and Maron bit into his lips to dampen the agony that tore at his back. He felt sticky blood course from his wounds and soak his loincloth.

"What do you seek, Maron?" Artok's voice sounded remote. Only the swish of the lash seemed to be the immediate reality.

"I seek nothing," Maron cried out. His voice almost ended in a shriek. But he fought the involuntary scream and prevented its release.

The whip descended again. "If that is so," the chief said calmly, "then this is the first step in your punishment for trespassing."

His back was laid open again and again until the torture clouded his senses and perspiration set the raw flesh twitching with agony. Then his body sagged between outstretched arms.

**I**T was pain that forced him back to consciousness. The pain of aching arms and smarting back. His shoulders, where outstretched arms twisted the muscles into quivering knots, throbbed dully. With great effort, he centered his feet under him and forced his trembling legs to take the weight of his limp body.

Strength returned slowly to numb arms as he listened to sounds in the distance. But he could detect

no one around him. Had they left him for dead? Or had they withdrawn so he could regain his senses and steel himself for further torture?

He tested the rope on his left hand. It was tight and bit through skin as he strained against it with as much strength as he could muster. He tried the right arm. There was a little slack. Maron attempted to work the loose loop down the length of the slender stone. But below where it was tied, the diameter of the stone enlarged and it would go no farther. He stretched the arm and the fingers went out to explore the stone and the corded hair that held him. There was a sharp edge to one of the faces of the rock!

Working the cord so that it lay over the edge, he thrust his hand forward and pulled it back repeatedly, scraping the rope. He could feel the strands parting! One by one they fell away. Inspecting the rope again, he learned he had cut more than halfway through.

But someone was approaching! The scent told him so at first, then the footfalls became distinct. Discarding concern for his wrist, he braced himself and gave a vicious tug. The rope parted. Not even stopping to unloop it from his bleeding wrist, he reached to the ground and groped. He found a stone, but its edge was not sharp enough. The footfalls were louder—almost there! He found and discarded two more rocks before he located one with a

thin edge. But it was too late! The Upper Level individual was standing before him.

"So you have awakened," the voice said mockingly.

Maron clutched the new found stone in his fist so he would not lose it and drew his arm back. He aimed at the spot from where the voice had come. His knuckles felt teeth crack under the flesh that his fist found as a target. The man dropped to the floor. Maron waited for evidence of his arising. But there was none. Then he used the sharp stone to cut his other wrist free.

For an indecisive moment he was motionless, sniffing the air. Then he used the stone to tap against one of the rocks that had held him. The echoes indicated the direction and distance of the exit that would lead him home. In a sprint, he headed for the tunnel.

**M**ARON had not yet found a position on his sleeping pile that would provide partial comfort for his bruised and aching body when the voice called his name softly.

"Yes, father," he answered, forcing himself to arise without betraying his pain with a moan.

"It is not your father," the voice said solemnly. "It is in the role of Chief Paral that I come."

Maron placed a hand on the other's lean shoulder. "You deny our relationship?"

The hand was shrugged off. "I

deny it—for the present—until I have spoken what I have to say."

Maron lowered his head and his shoulders sagged.

"You have broken our pact with the Upper Level," the chief accused.

"But how . . .?"

"Artok has been here to complain. He says you were twice caught above. He said you were being punished and would be detained. It was only my fatherly concern that forced me to plead in your behalf. I am grateful that he listened to an old man and released you."

"But, father," Maron protested, "he did not . . ."

"Quiet!" the chief demanded. "I am forced to exercise my tribal power. I order you to remain in our chamber according to the agreement that I have made with the Upper Level."

"But that agreement was not wise!"

"Not only was it wise," the other's voice rose, "but it was also another expression of our first law that decrees we are not to leave the known areas."

Maron spat in disgust. "A stupid basic law," he growled. "We have long ago stopped following other basic laws—taboos without meanings, like the ban against the songs that Larna sings."

The chief fumed. Maron could tell that in the shakiness his voice had assumed.

"You will heed the law!" he demanded.

"Must I heed also," Maron asked scornfully, "your stupid decree that says Larna must mate with the filth from above?"

Paral was silent momentarily. "That was no order, my son," his voice became warm. "Larna herself . . ."

"Larna is but a child. She does not know what must be done. Father, you must tell her not to go through with her plans!"

". . . But a child . . ." Paral repeated absently. "Yet she is wiser than I. The solution she offers is the only one. I could not order her to abandon it and still face my people."

"Bah!" Maron exclaimed disgustingly. "That is stupid thinking! Do you not realize that Artok is sly? Do you not know that he is mean and cruel and that his meanness is as solid and lasting as the rocks that are our walls? Do you really believe that when Larna becomes his mate he will feel a brotherhood for the people of the Lower Level and will say, 'Come, let us be friends; let us share what we have?'"

"There is no reason to believe otherwise. If he were determined to be hostile he would not go through the formality of asking Larna's chief for his consent. He would merely seize the mate he wants."

THE breath escaped forcibly through Maron's clenched teeth. "Artok wants more than Larna. He wants our bigger pool—our boil pit.

He wants the things that we have and he does not have. And he would have seized them long ago if he had been given the opportunity to learn our chamber—to find out where our treacherous pits are. If he knew the location of those pits he would not hesitate to send his fighting men here to chase us off perhaps kill us and drop our bodies in the very pits that protect us."

"Artok showed no interest in learning our chamber—the position of the pits."

"Father," Maron grasped the chief's shoulders, "let us do away with this thing that has come between you and me—between Larna and me. Let us resist Artok and his sneaking ones from the Upper Level. Let us tell them they cannot have anything of ours—that we will fight . . ."

"Fight with what, my son? You and the other five men of our chamber who have the strength to hurl rocks? The six of us against the scores of Artok?"

Paral moved, shifting to the right. Maron turned his head to follow the sounds. The chief walked slowly around him. Then Maron winced as trembling fingers touched his back tenderly, feeling the welts, torn skin and dried blood.

Paral's gasp was loud. "He said you were punished. But he did not say you were beaten like this!"

Maron suddenly wished his father had not felt the wounds and had not learned of the severity of the

lashing. But he soon chased sympathetic considerations from his mind and made profit of the opportunity to advance his argument.

"It is like I tell you, father. Artok is ruthless. We must resist him. We must . . ."

The chief lifted Maron's hands from his shoulders. "No, my son. We will not fight. I shall suffer as much as you over what the Upper Level ones have done. But I would even be willing to sacrifice you if it would mean peace and happiness for my people."

Paral turned to leave.

"Father," Maron called after him. "You will not tell Larna about—the punishment?"

"No, my son. I shall tell no one."

#### CHAPTER IV

**M**ARON spent the intervals between the next several sleep periods caring for his wounds. He was impatient to resume the search for a sanctuary to which he could bring Larna. While he reclaimed his strength he remained to himself and spoke with only the old women who brought him food. He longed to talk again with Larna—for another chance to convince her she must not carry through with the mating. But he did not seek her out. She was avoiding him, he rationalized, because she considered further contact would only add to their hopeless situation. He was glad she had not come to him, for she might have

discovered his injuries and he did not want that.

In his withdrawal to himself, there were periods of desperation. He considered stealing into the chamber above and hunting out Artok to slay him. But he did not know the Upper Level and the possibility of falling into unlearned pits while he stalked his prey, unable to use click-stones, was real enough to convince him he would have no chance of success.

When he removed the final scabs on his back after one sleep period, he realized that his strength, for the most part, had returned.

He selected Larna's voice out of the web of sound in the chamber and followed it to the weavers' stone. He stood behind her, listening to the chatter of the older women. Then he touched Larna on the shoulder.

The old women became silent while Larna rose. He took her hand and led her to the end of the room. There, she leaned against a boulder.

"Please, Maron," she begged, "Do not ask me again to change my mind."

The words made his blood swirl, but he forced himself to remain silent.

For a while he listened to her breathe in the still atmosphere. Then she said explanatorily, "Artok has promised there will be free passage between the chambers. Once more the people of the levels will be one—like they were long before you and

I were born."

"Larna," he held her face between his hands. "You cannot go!"

HE drew her close and kissed her. Arms went around his neck and her lips grew firm, returning the kiss.

"It is I whom you must be with always, Larna," he whispered.

"Not always, Maron," a sob was in her voice. "After the next sleep period . . ."

*"The next sleep period!"*

"Yes. That was decided upon when Artok came to complain about you."

"You *must* mate with me, Larna!" he pleaded. "I love you. You cannot give your love to someone who can give you nothing in return — who is evil . . ."

She placed her fingertips on his lips and stopped his voice. Then her sobs were unrestrained and she placed her head on his shoulder. But after a moment her voice was under control again.

"The Old Ones spoke of love, Maron . . . Remember the song: *Lighting up my eyes with love?— I wonder . . .*"

"Eyes!" he exclaimed. "That's the same word the hermit used!"

"Hermit?"

"Yes, an aged one who lives by himself many thousands of steps away."

He told the girl about his experiences in the far chamber. Then he asked:

"Does it seem possible, Larna, that cryers may have been made for some other purpose?"

"That is silly," she answered. "What else could they be for, except crying?"

"A man has them too," he reminded, "and men don't cry."

"You talk like some of the legends the Old Ones used to speak of before they became unpopular."

"Were there any, Larna, about the—outside?"

"The out—outside? I remember something—a queer, meaningless thing: *After the . . .* No. I cannot recall it. But it did have the word in it."

Maron was silent in thought.

"But nobody speaks of the legends any, more," she continued. "They forgot about them when they realized they did not know what they meant."

"The hermit remembers," he said thoughtfully. "He must know all of them."

Larna sighed. "He must be awfully lonely there all by himself."

Maron held her hand. "Not nearly as lonely as you will be in the Upper Level."

Suddenly he grasped her other hand. "The hermit's chamber is not far," he said excitedly. "It is dangerous, but it is well protected. And it would not take us long to learn it. He said we may come there."

The tinge of anxiety in his voice fortified itself. "And there's a pool . . . and fungus beds, and *Larna, we*

*will go there now!"*

He tugged her toward the passage.

"Maron," she cried, "we musn't! We . . ."

But he ignored her protests and her resistance weakened. At the mouth of the tunnel she forced him to a halt.

"We cannot do this, Maron! We must think of our people!"

"They will be safe as long as they are not lured from their chamber and do not give the ones from above a chance to learn it. With you gone, Paral will have no other choice but to resist them."

"I don't know . . ." she said indecisively as they went up the incline. But he noticed she was not drawing back any longer.

AS they entered the Upper Level he warned her against unnecessary noise and urged her to cross to the other tunnel swiftly. In silence, they continued to the chamber where he had discovered the footprints. There he found two click-stones. Listening absently to their echoes, he pushed on into the passage of the rapid winds, his mind engaged in search of justification for having abandoned his people. He wondered what course Artok would follow now that Larna was gone. Would he become wrathful and seek revenge? Would he send his fighters down, ignoring the great number he would lose to the pits before his revenge would be

exacted?

Maron's steps slowed involuntarily and he halted and turned to the girl.

"Larna . . ."

But his lips closed abruptly and his head jerked erect, facing in the direction from which they had come. Upper Level men! Artok! Unmistakably he detected the chief's odor. There were others too. Their scents were being carried rapidly on the swift wind that smot his face.

He grasped the girl's hand and continued down the passage, saying nothing. She followed mutely. The scent from behind grew stronger and he knew he was not making enough speed.

"Maron," she cried, "what is wrong?"

He did not answer. His faculties were dedicated to the task of avoiding the hazards of the passage with a minimum use of the echo stones. He realized the wind was his ally but the sound of the stones was his foe.

The pursuing scents grew heavier. Then he heard the first faint sound of the hand rocks they were using. They clicked several more times before the girl heard them too.

"Who is it, Maron?" she asked, frightened. "Who follows us?"

He ordered silence with a hiss of his breath between his lips.

"They are from the Upper Level!" she gasped.

"They will not overtake us," he promised. "We will hide behind the



pit in the chamber of the hermit. Do not worry, Larna."

Then he stopped suddenly, the girl running into his back. The wind was no longer evident! In his forced caution he had separated the clicks of his stones by too great a distance and had not noticed when they passed the passage leading to the hermit. He turned to retrace his steps. But the pursuers were too close! He knew he could not return to the entrance before they arrived there. Grasping the girl's wrist, he ran on, wishing she were capable of more speed.

**S**HE was panting heavily when they reached the blocked end of the passage. Artok's scent was close behind them. For a moment, Maron stood still and clicked his stones once. From the echoes he selected a large boulder near the wall and hid the girl behind it.

"We are safe now," he assured her, thinking of the huge rock pile and its wealth of throwing stones. "Do not move until I tell you it is all right to come out."

Not listening to Larna's protests, he mounted the sloping heap of stones. Artok's hand pebbles sounded again, uncomfortably close. Maron dropped to his stomach, seeking to remove his body from the path of the sound waves and prevent the muted, returning echo from betraying his position. But he had acted too late.

"Come down, Maron," Artok

shouted.

Maron grasped a stone and hurled it in the direction of the voice.

The rock banged against a boulder.

"Artok laughed. "Here we have protection. Up there you do not."

"Then come up and force me to give back the mate I have stolen from you," Maron shouted back derisively.

A rock whizzed past his ear and crashed into the pile.

He should not have spoken, he realized. In doing so he had only made himself a better target. Silently he moved several feet to his left, trying not to make any noise by dislodging rocks. Then he grasped stones in both hands.

The click from below sounded again. This time to the left of the position in which he had remembered Artok. He tossed one of his stones in the new direction. It, too, bounded off a boulder. And again a rock plopped onto the pile, barely missing him. Once more he changed position. His foot dislodged a stone, however, and the noise betrayed his location.

The next missile did not miss. It crashed into his hip. The thud established the target for a barrage. He tried to scamper back up the pile. But one of the rocks struck him on the shoulder. Another grazed the side of his head, staggering him. He fell.

"He's down!" Artok shouted.

The voice barely wormed its way

into Maron's consciousness. But his head became clearer in response to the threat and he lifted himself to his feet in time to detect the sound of Artok's charge.

"Find the girl!" the chief shouted as he ran.

**M**ARON shook his head and stooped to gather more stones. But Artok was already scurrying up the side of the heap and was upon him before he could bring his arms up to protect himself.

It was not Artok's fist that struck him. It was the edge of a stone that swung in his hand. The rock plowed a furrow of ruptured skin across his forehead. Then he was crashing down the pile. He rolled into the chief's legs and they both fell, dislodging rocks that cascaded down upon them.

Artok was on his feet first. Maron tried to quiet his labored breathing so he would not lead the enemy chief back to him. But he could not control the erratic gasps that his lungs demanded.

Groping hands clutched his neck and Artok's knee banged into his stomach. Maron brought a fist up feebly. But when it struck Artok's face, it had no effect. Heaving his body with all his remaining strength, he rolled over on the floor and Artok's hold was broken.

Maron leaped up. His only safety was atop the pile where he could hurl more stones until his strength returned. Realizing that, he

groped his way up. Artok came after him. Twice, as he fought to win a lead, the chief's hand grasped his leg, but fell off.

The third time Artok's grip was maintained and he used the hold to pull himself alongside Maron. His left hand reached out and found Maron's shoulder. Then his other fist crashed into his face.

Throwing blood from his mouth weakly, Maron pulled away. At the same time he only half-heard Larna's scream. While Artok's hand thrashed the air to find its target again, Maron found firm footing on the rock pile and lurched to his feet.

His head rammed painfully into solid stone. He had not known he was that close to the ceiling. The staggering blow dropped him, just as Artok's hand grasped his neck. Both men lost their footing and were carried down to the floor on the crest of a rock slide.

Maron did not rise. His numb body was motionless and he was only partly conscious of the torturous heaving of his chest. Even when Artok's fists struck him again and again with vehement ferocity he was not able to move. Then he was not even conscious of the blows.

As his senses returned, Artok's click-stones were only dimly discernible in the distance. He heard them faintly twice more, then they were too far away to send their sounds through the passage to where he lay.

## CHAPTER V

FOR a long while he remained motionless, too dazed even to remove the stones from his legs. Finally his breathing became normal. But he did not move. He forced himself to relax until he regained his strength. He realized he could not now overtake Artok.

Slowly, he rose to a sitting position, wiped the drying blood from his forehead and picked away a clot that had stuck one cryer lid closed. Then he pushed the smaller stones off his right leg and concentrated his attention on the large rock that lay across his left foot. There was injury to the foot. He winced from the pain that jolted his leg as he shifted the weight of the rock. Then, with a surge of strength, he lifted the stone on an edge and withdrew his leg.

When he let the rock drop he felt, rather than heard, the vibration of the shifting weight of the pile that that had been stabilized by the rock. Frantically, he rolled his body over again and again. The minor sounds of the grating stones became a frightening roar. The face of the pile slid downward and covered the spot on which he had lain.

Stiffening with his face down, he braced himself, expecting the collapsing pile to engulf him. But the noise diminished and only a handful of small rocks rolled far enough to strike him. Their force was not sufficient to cause additional pain.

Nevertheless, he remained on the floor, hands covering his head, until he was certain the heap of rocks had found a new stability.

Estimating his injury as a sprained ankle, he uncovered his head, rolled over and sat up.

His throat erupted in a hoarse, terrified scream and he buried his face in his hands, seeking to claw through the skin at fierce indescribable pains that tore beneath the surface of his forehead. Then the pain gave way to fright as he sat trembling and attempting to discover what had made him scream. Yet he was fearful of letting his hands down and exposing himself to the terror again.

What had it been? That weird, unreal, knife-like stab that had seemed to pierce his head and wrack his very soul with agonizing fury? Afraid to move, he cringed in panic from the possibility that it might happen again.

There was more to it than pain, he realized suddenly. It was as though he had abruptly discovered the existence of something of which he had not been aware before. It was something that had happened to his cryers! *They had suddenly assumed the properties of his nose—his ears!* They had experienced a fantastic change that had made him capable of knowing his surroundings in a way other than through interpretation of odors, sounds and touch!

His mind had become aware of

his surroundings instantaneously—of every rock that stood before him—of the boulder behind which he'd hidden Larna—of every detail of the passage's wall, each irregularity of the floor and ceiling. He had, in one short second, known the position of all objects close to him and some in the distance! It was as though he had developed a million exploring fingers at the ends of a thousand groping hands and was capable of touching at the same time each object that comprised his surroundings!

Was there actually pain? Or had he experienced a frightful sensation the likes of which none of his people had ever known before? What miracle had happened in this remote dead end passage, far removed from the familiar level and passages of his youth? Had he been killed? Was what he was experiencing the initial impact of a promised afterlife of peace and beauty such as he had never known in the chambers?

**UNABLE** to control the tremors racing through him, he withdrew his hands from his face.

The startling pain once more! The stupendous impression that he was touching a myriad object! He could not stand it! Again his face was buried in trembling hands. And he sought for mental composure to study the sensation. It was as though his brain had found a different means of interpreting sound!

If what he had experienced was sound, he reasoned, it was as though the sound existed all over at one time—in each little nook of the passage! As though it increased in intensity in the direction of the rock pile! As though there had been a small opening at the top of the pile through which the uncanny sound was flowing into the passage.

But it was not sound. He knew that. It was something else. Something as alien to his experiences as anything he had encountered in his entire life.

And again the fear of the unknown seized him. Shouting his terror to the mystery that assailed him, he leaped up without drawing his hands from his face and bolted down the passage. His foot hit a stone and, in falling, he threw his arms out.

Once more the silent sound smote his face and passed within, as though a great opening had appeared through the front of his head—a hole that allowed impressions of the passage to reach his brain.

He rose frantically and dashed forward, covering his face again. But a hanging stone caught his arm, roughly jolted it. In the second during which the hole in his face was exposed, he became aware that the mysterious, silent sound was not as *loud* as before—if he could use that word for sound that made no noise. In that instant the new sensation brought to his brain the impression of a boulder in his path of escape. As though he had learned the loca-

tion of the object with click-stones, he leaped it and continued in flight.

His shoulder bumped twice into obstructions and he had to slow down lest he bash his head. The passage had turned to the right twice since he left the area of the rock pile. Cautiously, he withdrew his hands. And he sighed with relief. He was safe now—safe in an area where the silent sounds were not detectable, where the frightening sensations no longer lashed into his brain through the hideous hole that he had not known was in his flesh—again in a familiar world which he could negotiate with customary methods.

It was only then that the curtain of terror parted to allow pain sensations from his ankle to reach his brain. He continued limping along the passage, stopped only long enough to find click-stones, then sought the entrance to the hermit's chamber. The ankle would have to be tied for support before he could return to his chamber. The hermit, he was certain, would have plenty of hair to spare for that purpose.

THE old one's hands trembled so that Maron had to take the woven band of hair from him and continue trussing the ankle.

"But I do not understand!" the hermit blurted. "These are strange things you tell me!"

"The eyes!" Maron exclaimed impatiently. "The eyes are nothing but great holes in the head—big

enough for all the stones and rocks and pits in the passages to pass through! Don't you understand? It has something to do with what your grandfather told you. He was not as crazy . . ."

"You have—*see!*" the hermit gasped. "You have—*look!* And it was said that we could *see* only when we were in the—*outside!*"

The old one moved toward the exit.

"Wait!" Maron ordered.

The hermit returned.

"What is—*outside?*" Maron asked. "Did your ancestor say what was there?"

"Outside," the hermit's voice faltered. "is a place the First Ones did not tell their children about because they were afraid they might go there and die. It is a place as big as all these chambers and passages put together. Much bigger than that. It is so large that your voice does not even jump back at you after you shout. There are no walls to send it back. And you can walk in strange places without click-stones."

"Just like you knew, without feeling or hearing," Maron suggested, "the position of all things near you."

The old one's voice was eager. "That's exactly what grandfather used to say!—Then you *have been outside!* You *have experienced* all these things!"

"But why do I not experience them in here—in the rest of the chambers? Do I not bring my—my

eyes in here with me?"

"It was said that people once lived outside. That when they came into the chambers they believed they could keep their special ability to *see* if they brought certain things with them. But they entered in such great haste that they had not the time to bring these things."

The hermit moved off again.

"Where do you go, aged one?" Maron asked, listening to the other shuffle across the floor.

"I go to *see!*" he answered in a trembling voice. "I go to the—*outside!*"

Maron drew the woven hair strip tightly around his ankle and secured it with a series of knots as he traced the sounds of the hermit's belabored progress in the passage. Then he stood on the fortified ankle and tested it. There was an uncomfortable stiffness, but he felt no great pain. He would be able to use the trussed foot, he told himself, with only slightly decreased efficiency.

**M**ARON did not pass through the Upper Chamber to reach his quarters. Instead, he decided to force his body through the confines of a small tunnel that bypassed the area of the hostile people. He remembered the alternate route from repeated use of it when he was a child.

The confines were narrow—almost too narrow in spots—but by contracting his shoulders he passed the restrictions and was once again

in the room of familiar sounds and scents.

"Larna! Paral!" his voice tingled with excitement as he cast it lustily into the chamber.

The sounds ahead ceased. Then they resumed and there was a wary shuffling of feet in his direction. The profuse scents told him the entire populace was approaching. He detected his father in front of the advance.

"Paral!" he inquired. "What is it?"

"It is the decision of your people," the chief said ceremoniously, "that you be made to remain in your chamber and be punished fully for your disobedience."

"What . . . ?"

"Your abduction of Larna has been reported by Artok. He insisted that if you returned you should be punished."

"Larna," Maron's voice became gruff, "where is she?"

"She is in the Upper Level for safekeeping," an old woman's voice rang out.

Maron reached behind him, felt a boulder and leaped upon it.

The crowd murmured angrily and shifted toward him.

"I do not seek to flee," Maron calmed them. "But you must listen to me."

There were more murmurs. Maron stilled them with a commanding shout.

"I have found a miracle!" his voice demanded attention. "I have

found a place where men can live like gods! Where nothing is impossible. Where all of us can have a million unreal fingers to learn new surroundings without moving from one spot."

**I**GNORING the growled protests, he continued in rapid speech. "It is the place that will prove the long-forgotten legends are true! It is the heaven that some believe we are promised before we die! Listen to me—all of you . . . We live like squirming animals, groping our way around with our simple abilities to taste and smell, hear and touch. There is yet another way—a more wonderful way of learning the things around us than all the other ways put together . . .

"Imagine a large opening in your head through which knowledge of all things comes rushing into your brain at one time! There *is* such an opening! Two of them! And I have discovered how to use them. The openings are *your cryers!*"

The surging tide of angry exclamations drowned out his voice.

Then Paral cried for silence.

In the quiet that followed, a man shouted:

"This is your son, Paral. This is the one you would force on us to become our chief—an idiot who rants in the meaningless voice of a madman!"

"He *is* mad!" a woman shouted.

"Tie him up before he uses his strength to take our very lives away

from us!" It was the voice of an older woman.

"You've got to listen!" Maron implored. "It is true—all that I tell you . . . If you'll but come with me . . ."

"Tie him up! Tie him up!" the insistent voices of both men and women intoned. The words became a chant as Maron listened to the women retreating to the rear of the crowd.

Then Paral gave the order in curt words.

His spirit vanquished, Maron did not resist the hands that reached up roughly and grasped his legs to pull him from the boulder. In a lethargy of despair, he let himself be propelled by the few strong hands that held his arms and shoulders.

Near the sleeping quarters, they forced his arms behind his back and around one of the slender stones that stretched from the ceiling to the floor. Then they coiled rope around his wrists and arms and made them fast with tight knots while he remained impassive, his head bowed abjectly.

"It is done, Paral," one of the men said.

"And we have not harmed him," another added sneeringly.

"He should not remain here," said the first. "We should deliver him to Artok's chamber where there are enough men to see that he does not free himself."

"He will remain here," Paral's

voice was a directive.

" . . . At least until after the mating," some added facetiously.

There was a round of laughter and the men walked off, leaving Maron to his despair.

**T**HE sleep period came and he listened to the others retiring. Then he let his body slide down along the damp stone that held him and sat with legs outstretched. Although his head lowered until it touched his chest, he did not sleep. Instead his thoughts were of Larna and Artok and the mating ceremony that would be held just before the next sleep period: the strange miracle and the hermit; the legends and the prophecies that were engrained deeply in the hermit—less securely but still appreciably in Larna.

His mind skipped over the humiliating details of the ceremony to wonder how the mating would fit in with Artok's plans of chamber conquest.

The snores of the sleepers become louder and threatened to entice him hypnotically toward sleep. But he forced himself to remain awake. The only infant in the group, cried for its milk and Maron knew the sleep period was almost over. The baby was taken care of and quiet returned once more.

Then he was aware of the guarded sound of approach. He stiffened, his nostrils quivering. It was Paral. The chief came up and placed a finger on his son's lips, then press-

ed his mouth close to his ear.

"My son," he whispered solicitously, "it would not be well for you to be here after tomorrow. You have drawn Artok's hate. When there is free passage between the chambers, he will demand you for his justice."

Maron said nothing.

"He does not yet know you have returned," Paral continued. "When he finds out, you will be gone from here, my son. And you will not return. Nor will you return to the Upper Level." The statement was an order. "Perhaps after time has passed and tempers and emotions have cooled, you may come back."

Maron felt the sharp stone brush against his wrists. There was a pressure on the ropes that held his hands together. Then it was parted.

"Father," Maron said, rubbing his wrists. "You do not believe that I am mad, do you?" Then his voice became excited. "I will go and get some of the silent sound and bring it back with me. Then you and the people will have to believe."

"No, Maron," curt authority returned to the chief's voice, "you will not return here. Do you understand? You must not! For your own safety and the happiness of your people you will not come back!"

## CHAPTER VI

**M**ARON negotiated the passage much more rapidly this time, his acute touch-memory not failing



to guide him around the hazards of the way. Ignoring the jolting aches from his ankle, he trotted past the wind-diverting entrance to the hermit's chamber and rushed on toward the stone pile and its mysterious emanations.

As he sped around the last bend, his fear of the unknown returned and he stopped. The pain was again stabbing at his brain through the two apertures in his face that he knew were really not apertures at all. While he squinted and resisted the impulse to hide his eyes, he marveled at the refinement of the impressions he was receiving over the infinitely slow sense of touch.

The pain abated and the rocks and other features of the passage became more concretely set in his mind. When he had received their impressions with this new sense, it was at first as though he had touched stones that had sprouted several inches of tousled hair all over their surfaces. But now the sensation of fuzziness was leaving and the outlines of the stones were becoming sharp.

Maron walked gingerly toward the pile. It was then he discovered that, as with his ears, he had directional control over the new organs. He stopped to test it. Impressions were reaching him from directly ahead. His millions of miraculous, unfelt fingers were touching details of the pile. Suddenly he thought of the wall to his left. Without conscious direction, his eyes twitched beneath

eyelids and began receiving impressions from the wall! A sound from the vicinity of the pile drew his attention and his head turned in that direction. His action was intended to set his ears at right angle to the noise so he could study it. But he found the move also placed the focal point of his attention in front of his eyes too! He blinked, and in blinking learned he had the power to shut out the sensations—to close the holes in his head.

Awe-stricken, he regarded the irregular opening between the top of the pile and the ceiling—the area through which the mysterious material that hurt his eyes seemed to be flowing. He advanced to the pile and up its slope. Several stones which he dislodged slid to the floor.

"Who's there?" the hermit's voice came through the opening.

Entranced in his adventure, Maron did not answer. He continued to the top and brought his face to the opening. The pain in his head returned fiercely and he closed his eyelids.

There was a laugh and the hermit said, "You'll become accustomed to it. The light is strong at first. But it will not hurt after a while."

"Light?" Maron parted his eyelids and grimaced, allowing some of the substance to leap into his brain. He wondered whether the indistinctness would leave the objects before him.

"The light . . . That is what makes it possible for us to see," the hermit

explained.

**H**IS eyes were almost fully open now. The passage, he noted, continued ahead for about fifty paces. Then there was another opening—this one the size of the tunnel's cross section. But he could not look at it. The light that was streaming in was intensely painful and he forced his eyes away from it!

"After a while you will be able to look outside too," the old one promised.

Maron's ears aligned his face with the voice and his eyes focused on—

He screamed and scrambled back down the pile into the semi-safety of the passage. The object had moved! The thing was slender, like a hanging rock had shifted its position toward him!

Trembling, he cowered against the wall of the inner passage and studied the memory impression of what he had seen. Then he remembered the small round blob that had been located atop the slender form. His hand reached up and touched the side of his head in bewilderment. He remembered the two indentations that were a feature of the blob; and his hand went to his eyes. Thinking of the protuberance in the center of the small mass, he touched his nose.

The object hadn't been frightening after all, he reassured himself. He had been alarmed, he rationalized, because the light had shown him for the first time a fellow man!

He extended his arms before him and regarded his stout biceps, the bulging flesh at his elbows, the thinner wrists and burly hands. Then he looked at his legs. Never before—not even with the sense of touch—had he been able to receive a sensory impression of the entire body at one time.

He went back to the top of the pile, squirmed through the opening and descended on the other side. As the hermit walked toward him, Maron glanced back at the hole through which he had come and compared it with the huge opening in the other direction.

"Back there," said the hermit, pointing to the smaller hole, "is what the ancients referred to as darkness."

"How do you know so much about the ancients?"

"I know very little about them," the old one's mouth opened and Maron, seeing the few remaining teeth, recognized the first smile he had ever seen.

"But now," the other continued, "I am learning more."

He walked to the wall and placed his hand on what appeared to be a stone. Studying it, Maron realized it was indeed an odd rock, if it was that at all. He felt it. The sides were as slick as any object he had ever felt—slicker! There were no irregularities on its surface and its edges were in straight lines. The hermit fumbled with the rock and its top suddenly swung up.

"Welcome, children of man," a loud, strange voice filled the passage with a suddenness that crushed Maron. "Welcome to your heritage."

"Do not be afraid," the hermit said. "I have listened to the voice twice since I have come outside."

MARON approached the object cautiously, seeing that there were many similar ones, but of various sizes, placed against the wall. The voice continued:

"Only you know how long it has been since we entered the dismal caverns to escape the ravaging destruction, the chaotic aftermath of the last great war . . ."

The words made little sense to Maron. Most of them he had never heard before. Yet, entranced, he listened.

". . . For posterity, we record this message—in the hope that the knowledge thus transmitted will be the beginning of a new civilization. There is the said possibility that racial life in the cave may have had a degenerating effect and these words and instructions may be useless. For that reason, we have provided other, more elementary means of transmitting knowledge. These means, my children, are preserved, together with picture instructions, in other cabinets stored here. Your curiosity will lead you to them . . ."

There was a pause in the voice and Maron took advantage of it to peer into the top of the open box. But the monolog resumed and he

retreated once more, cringing.

". . . The plague that has lain in the wake of the holocaust has disappeared, consumed by the patience of time. Were this not so you would not have existed long enough since leaving the inner caves to hear my voice.

"And now, once more, man's children can walk the earth under the splendor of the stars . . ."

The voice droned on.

"I do not understand it," Maron said as he turned his attention to the other boxes.

But the voice eventually rose in volume and Maron was forced to listen once more.

". . . From the molten and unrecognizable ruins of our society, we bequeath this knowledge to a new civilization. In the event that humanity has retrogressed to the beginning of the path, our first gift will be—fire . . . In the first and smallest box are bits of flint and steel . . . By striking—"

Maron's interest in the speaking box disappeared and he turned away, the hermit following.

"It is like I was told," the old one offered. "Except that great fires came in the sky with a suddenness that chased them empty-handed into the chambers."

HESITANTLY, Maron approached the mouth of the passage. Standing in the opening, his chin dropped as his eyes leap-frogged from one feature of the panorama

to the next. There were huge things that reared up from the ground on long, stout stems, their round tops comprised of thousands of small, fluttering objects. And in the distance there were great masses of rock, some of them partially covered with many of the things on stems. Overhead, great blobs of material floated by without any visible support.

He noticed now that all the things before him were of a texture that ranged between the hurting brightness of the light itself and the vacuous nothingness of the chambers.

But all the objects were different in another respect too. Just as the sound of Larna's voice changed from one beautiful tone to another, so did the objects seem to be comprised of different qualities that were beautiful in their variations one from the other. The great space in between the floating forms reminded him of the low, sad notes Larna sang; and the quality of the vibrant, bulbous tops that sat on the straight stems made him think of Larna's high-pitched, happy notes.

One of the floating masses began producing brilliant light at an end. Maron watched the phenomenon in awe. The intensity of the light increased until it was blinding. Then, suddenly, a round mass emerged from behind the floating thing. But Maron, trembling and cringing, could not look at it, so terribly did it hurt his eyes! Frightened, he retreated into the passage; groped for

a nearby rock to steady himself; missed it, but recovered his balance in time to prevent falling.

He reached again to touch the rock, but his hand went wide by several inches. Once more he tried. This time his eyes guided the hand to the stone.

"It will take some time," the hermit said, "for us to learn to use the light and our eyes like we can use sound and our ears now."

Maron looked back at the talking box . . .

". . . Of importance is the wheel," it was saying. "The construction is simple . . ."

Turing his back to the voice, Maron reached out suddenly and clasped his hands tightly together, leaving a hollow between the palms. Then he strode toward the dark, small entrance.

"You are returning to the chambers?" the hermit asked incredulously.

"I take some light back."

"That is impossible," the old one laughed.

Maron climbed the pile, walked into the darkness and opened his hands. There was nothing within. He returned to the hermit.

"But there is a way you can bring light with you," the old one suggested. "The voice tells how to make fire. Fire makes light."

"How do you make—fire?" Maron asked eagerly.

The hermit walked to the first cabinet; reached to the floor, and

picked up two stones.

"These were in the box," he explained, striking them together.

Maron recoiled as he watched the small bits of light leap into the air each time the stones touched. Without speaking, he grasped the objects from the hermit's hands; tested them, and climbed back over the pile.

"... Stars always remain motionless in the night sky," the voice box was saying. "By watching it, one will at all times know the direction in which he is going and will not get lost. Charts will be found . . ."

## CHAPTER VII

AS Maron squeezed through the mouth of the safe, alternate passage and into his chamber he was alarmed at the unexpected silence. Motionless, he strained his ears, alert for any evidence that would tell him there were people within. But there was none.

"Paral!" he shouted.

Save the echoes, there was no answer.

"It is Maron!" his voice boomed again.

The silence persisted.

Puzzled, he walked into the mouth of the gloom; past the pool that was always alive with life during the wakeful periods; past the boil pit and the weaving rock; through the sleeping area, and toward the other end of the chamber.

At the brink of the nearest pit he paused and tried to calm confusion with reason. Then the sound of breathing reached him—restrained, barely perceptible.

Maron whirled. "Who's there?"

The breathing stopped. He advanced, his nostrils dilating. Out of the scents that were permanent attachments of the chambers came one that was fresh—that of Larna's brother.

"Come out, Sarka." Maron demanded.

Suddenly there was rapid motion. Maron lurched forward, swept around a boulder and caught the arm of the youth, halting his dash from the sleeping quarters.

"You are not—mad. Maron, *are you?*" Sarka asked, terror-stricken. "You will not hurt . . ."

"Of course I am not mad!" he released the boy. "The others—where are they?"

"It is almost the sleep period. They are in the Upper Level—the ceremony."

"The fools!" Maron fumed. "They have let themselves be lured away! Left their chamber unguarded—free to be learned by Artok's fighters!"

EVEN as he spoke, the loud but distant sound of click-stones came from the far end of the chamber. They came first from a pair of pebbles close to one of the chamber's walls. Then another pair was heard, some several feet from the

first. Still another pair—closer to the stream that ran down the center of the area. There were many men, Maron realized, all advancing in a line.

"Down! Quick!" he thrust the boy behind a boulder and hid himself there too. "Before they learn we are here!"

Then the click-stones sounded to their rear, from the other entrance to the chamber. Maron turned and tried to estimate the number of men coming from that direction. He guessed three.

"Into the pool!" Maron gave the youth a shove. "There they will not detect you."

Crouching low against the boulder, Maron turned his attention to the more immediate danger—the smaller, closer group. Then came what he had feared but was nevertheless waiting for—the abrupt silencing of the pebbles. A silence that betrayed a halt by the advancers to evaluate surprising echoes. Finally the clicking resumed, but at an increased, excited rate.

Slowly, he eased his body around to the rear of the boulder. The stones clattered furiously now, attempting to ferret out his new location as the advance continued cautiously and the men converged on his hiding place.

At precisely the right moment, he leaped over the rock and sent his body flying at the nearest foe. Maron's arms wrapped around him and bore him down. His fist went out

with terrific force and thrust home on the first try. The form underneath him ceased struggling abruptly.

As he rose, an arm reached from the welter of sound and scent behind Maron and wrapped itself around his neck.

"Do not let him escape to spread the alarm!" a voice cried out close to his ear. Then the man turned his head toward the other end of the chamber, "Tharom! Orthap! Mixal!—"

Maron reached over his head and grabbed a handful of hair. Tossing the man with his hip, he flung him over his head and to the floor. As he whirled to face a new sound behind him, a knee buried itself in his abdomen and he clutched his stomach in pain. A fist grazed the side of his face and another smashed into his neck, stunning him. But he shook his head and lashed out furiously, his knuckles burying themselves in vulnerable skin. As the man fell, another leaped on Maron's back. But he squirmed from the grip, turned and sent his fists flailing out wildly, striking again and again.

SHOUTS of the struggle mounted, and welling through the clamor was the din of click-stones in the hands of those who were rushing forward from the other end of the chamber.

A fist found the back of Maron's neck and the blow sent him sprawl-

ing on the floor. But before they could pin his arms to his side, he rolled over rapidly and regained his feet. Then he fled toward the far end of the chamber—toward the men who were advancing from the other direction. But he did not allow himself to gain too large a lead on his pursuers. He ran directly toward the nearest pit. When he knew he was but five feet from the abyss, he cast himself upon the floor.

The foot of one of the men behind him snagged against his hip and the man's body catapulted through the air. He screamed, but too late to warn the other two in their headlong rush.

Maron rose, listened to their shouts of horror as they plunged down toward the bottom. Their hollow voices became silent with a suddenness that was startling and that brought an abrupt halt to the click-stones on the other side of the pit.

"I am still here!" Maron boasted. "I wait for you!"

A click-stone sounded ahead, to his right. Then another to the left—feeling out the treacheries of the chamber.

Then suddenly the sounds resumed their regularity and became fainter as the bearers of the stones returned in the direction from which they had come.

The retreat gathered speed. But as Maron listened appreciatively to the diminishing sounds, he realized suddenly they would be on their way back to Artok with the news. He

could reach there much quicker through the shorter connection at the end of the chamber near the pool. He raced off in that direction.

"Remain here," he shouted to Sar-ka as he sprinted past the pool. "If they return rush to the Upper Chamber to warn us."

HE entered the top chamber cautiously, wishing he could make use of pebbles to assure safe progress past the hazards and obstructions. There were many sounds and scents in the room—odors of both Upper and Lower Level people.

Groping with outstretched hands and wary feet, he was thankful the wind was in his face and his scent would not be carried to the others ahead. He hugged the wall, deploring his unfamiliarity with the surroundings.

Finally he stood with his back pressed against a hanging rock, close to the spot where the scent of the people from the Lower Chamber was strongest. From farther ahead in the room the boisterous voices of the Upper Level tribesmen floated to drown out the talk of the smaller group!

But suddenly an excited, unintelligible murmur ran through the ranks of the Lower Levels. Then a voice shouted from their midst: "Maron is here! In this chamber!"

The shout had the impact of an alarm. Silence fell over the Upper Level ones too.

"What sort of trick is this?" a

loud voice demanded rashly from the center of the other group. It was Artok's.

Maron placed his people between him and the other group as he crept along the floor in a circuitous route toward Larna.

"This is treachery!" the voice of another Upper Leveler joined Artok's. "They have smuggled Maron in!"

"They prepare an attack!" a third man warned.

"They will not carry it out!" Artok screeched. "We will not wait for *them* to attack!"

Paral's voice fought its way from stuttering obscurity. "No! No! Artok, *you are wrong!*"

"Rush them and seize the girl!" Artok commanded.

There was no time for caution now. Maron lurched forward, bowling over kinsmen and friends as he raced for Larna. Then she screamed. Familiar with their own terrain, Artok's men had reached her first.

Maron ran, straining his ears to ferret out the minor sounds that would offer indication of the direction in which they were taking the girl.

As he pushed his way through the bewildered, milling group that was his people, shouts began to tear from their throats. The party was being attacked from all sides!

"Fight them!" Maron shouted. "Do not cower and wait for the slaughter!"

Then a chorus of familiar voices

rose ragefully. The younger men were beginning to fight back! But Maron had no time to help them, for Larna, her screams muffled, was being dragged toward the other end of the chamber. He lagged the girl and her abductors by not more than fifty yards.

**T**HEN his ears sensed their abrupt change of direction and the sudden move confused him. Summoning will power, he slowed to a cautious trot. He arrived at the spot where they had turned with the girl and he stopped. His foot went out in a step and touched nothing solid. Having been prepared for that eventuality, he drew it back from the pit's mouth without losing his balance.

The near fatal move was restraining influence and he realized he could not rush after the girl and her captors now. He surmised, anyway, that they had already joined the greater congregation of the Upper Level.

Now he scented Artok—apart from the group! He was on Maron's left and his voice was thundering:

"Ratole! Ladrot!—All of you!—Stop the direct attack!"

The sound of the voice changed as the chief turned his head in another direction. "Man the ledge! Prepare to hurl!"

Maron stalked toward Artok. Then, only feet away from his prey. He steeled himself for the leap. Now he was in the air, his arms reaching for the spot where he had estimated



he would find the other's body.

Breath rushed from his lungs—expelled by the force of the large rock on which he had hurled himself. Then, as he flattened against the stone, he realized Artok had concealed himself behind the boulder for protection while he shouted orders.

Maron rolled over instantly and threw himself off the rock. Simultaneously, a large stone swished through the air and shattered itself against the top of the boulder.

Then Maron was on his feet again. He rushed around the boulder and his hands found Artok's neck. He lowered his head and butted it into the other's face. Drawing back his fist, he crashed it into the same spot. The body sagged in his hand. He let it drop to the floor.

But the cries of his people reached a new apex of fear and agony. With the frenzied shouts came the sounds of stones plopping from a height. Some of them struck other stones on the chamber's floor; others struck objects of a much softer substance. Then the moans filled the chamber like a dirge.

"Run!" he shouted to his people. "Run from beneath the ledge!"

"We can't!" It was Paral who answered. "There are pits all around!"

A staggering body fell against Maron's back. It was Artok attempting to rise. Maron was propelled forward and collided with the

boulder. A sharp edge pressed into his abdomen. It was one of the fire-stones which he had concealed under his loincloth! Excitedly, he withdrew them and leaped atop the boulder.

He struck the stones together.

The sparks flew and bathed the chamber in sickening brightness. The momentary illumination disclosed the angry faces of Upper Level men rushing toward him from the larger congregation; the panorama of men on the outcropping of rock—frozen in the motion of hurling stones; the huddled, frightened group that was his own people.

Even before the brief illumination disappeared with the extinguishment of the half-dozen sparks that had flared, what had been a riotous din was throttled completely and there was only silence.

He struck the rocks again. The illumination this time showed that the men rushing toward him had halted in confused shock. Some had already brought hands toward their faces. The men on the ledge had forgotten about their stones. His people bore bewildered expressions.

"Do not be afraid!" he cried as the second surge of light surrendered to darkness. "It is what I told you about! The silent sound! The light!"

Screams drowned out his voice.

He brought the rocks together again. Lighted was a panorama of disorder. Upper Level fighters had their backs toward him in frantic flight. The men on the ledge were scrambling down. Some of them had

fallen.

In the subsequent darkness, Par-al's voice fought for dominance over the cries of his people. "Do not move! Let us do as Maron says!"

Producing another instant of light, Maron directed his attention to the area the congregation of Upper Level folks had occupied. There were no Upper Levelers left there now—only Larna, her body pressed close to the floor and hands covering her head.

In one more shower of sparks, the corner of Maron's eye caught the blur of motion near his elbow that was Artok fleeing to join his people in their dash for safety.

Maron did not strike his stones again. He dropped them and hurled himself from the boulder into the darkness to intercept Artok.

The leap was successful. His arms wrapped around the chief's shoulders and together they crashed to the ground. Artok eluded the grip momentarily and scurried away. Maron reached out and grasped his leg. Then they were on their feet again.

Artok's fists flailed out wildly. But Maron bore in and landed crushing blow after crushing blow as Artok staggered backward.

Maron advanced after him, but remembered the nearby pit and stopped. He listened for Artok's body to drop to the floor when he finished reeling. But the sound did not come. Instead there was a frightened hoarse scream. As the wailing sound continued, it faded startlingly rap-

idly in the distance and became increasingly hollow. Then, from far below, came the sound of flesh crashing into loose stones.

Turning away from the pit, Maron began snapping his fingers as a substitute for click-stones and headed toward Larna.

**H**OLDING tightly to her hand, he led the girl around the final bend in the passage. Ahead was the rock pile with its opening at the top.

"You will not be frightened while I am with you, Larna," he said reassuringly.

"I do not know what to expect," she answered tremulously.

"You will do as I tell you. I will be with you, holding your hand."

He halted abruptly, apprehensively. There was no light at the end of the passage! Had the outside gone away? Had the opening been closed?

Advancing to the pile, he climbed it, tugging the girl after him. Then he breathed easier. The opening was still there. There was a faint glow coming through.

And once more he heard the sound from the box.

"Is—is that the voice of the ancestor?" the girl asked, hesitatingly.

"Yes," he helped her through the hole, listening to the voice repeat what he had already heard and had not understood

" . . . And now, once more, man can walk the earth under the splen-

dor of the stars.

"But he will ever be reminded of his fatal escapade by the shimmering and deadly brightness of the new orb that now circles our sky—a grim remembrance of the devastation and total death that has laid waste the surface of the world.

"It is well that the satellite remains, spotted with the pock-marks of counter destruction, to attest to the ferocity of the final battle that raged between the defenders on this side of the planet and the enemy across the seas whose ill-used science made it possible for them to commandeer the greatest of all asteroids and establish it in an orbit as a firing base.

"Perhaps they did not know that their final attack would erase all evidence of life from earth. Certainly, they did not realize that, being stranded on that airless world and with earth life destroyed, they would soon perish also.

"When we enter the caverns, we shall see the destruction which is even now on its way from the satellite to rent our upper atmosphere and send great fingers of sparkling chaos streaking across the skies to sear and poison our world.

"Could we remove the gruesome evidence of that mad chapter in man-

kind's history, we would not do so. We bequeath it as a warning signal to prevent recurrence . . ."

Maron shook his head, helping the girl down the pile. He did not understand this part of the message and he was afraid he never would.

The girl's face was vivid with emotion as he led her past the voice box. But he only half-noticed her struggles to comprehend the strange things that were happening to her eyes. He was rather concerned over the present nature of the light—its great decrease in intensity, almost to the level of what he knew as darkness.

They passed the hermit, almost asleep by the side of the voice box. "This is what the ancient ones called night," he stirred. "Outside are the stars."

Maron and the girl left the cave.

He glanced overhead and felt her tighten her grip on his hand.

"Do not be frightened," he placed an arm around her shoulder. "Remember your song—'*See the Shining Stars Above?*'"

A smile captured her face and she drew closer to him.

And for the first time they watched the moon come from behind a cloud.

"Beautiful," she said.

THE END

## IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!

Following our bonus subscription offer last issue we were flooded with orders—for which we thank you, our readers. But for those who missed the bargain subscription opportunity, we're going to present it once again. Don't pass up this great bonus offer — TURN TO PAGE 163 NOW!



Conducted by *Mari Wolf*  
Guest Editorial by *Rog Phillips*

**M**ARI asked me to do a guest editorial for her department this month. I thought it a poor idea, because she has a much nicer style of writing than I have, and I know you readers would enjoy her more than me in this spot. Someday I hope to be known as Mari Wolf's husband. I'm that now, but you know what I mean—when she's really famous as a writer. They will say, "Oh, him? He's Mari Wolf's husband." And the others will say, "Oh?"

For a while she's going to have a tougher time with her fan review department than I do with the CLUB HOUSE in *Amazing Stories*, because *Imagination* isn't monthly yet. She has more fanzines per issue to review. That should be remedied soon though, because *Madge* is right at the top under Bill Hamling's guidance, and that means it will go monthly before long.

Some of you new readers may get

the impression that fans are catered to too much in *Madge*. It isn't so, really. The editor knows that the so-called acti-fans represent only a small percent of the readership. But he also knows they are an interested and interesting group of readers. They like to do things, and this department is to help them, and to help you if you want to get acquainted with them.

I like to think of the science fiction reading public as a group of people of all ages who have grasped the romance of ideas, especially ideas about the universe we live in, its past and future. Many of the younger fans will eventually be writers and scientists. Many of the older ones would have been if there had been such a thing as science fiction to imbue them with that spark when they were young.

But not all the younger fans will become writers and scientists. Right now in our Armed Forces are young

men who were and still are stf fans. They have seen the expanded horizons of science fiction. They have seen the world of the far future, when spaceships ply the interplanetary and interstellar lanes. They have put a Chrome-plated high compression head on the V8 motor in their hot-rod, and dreamed it was a Neutronium lining in the rockets of their space jallopy. Right now they are hoping that dream will come true some day for their children, as it will when the forces of dictatorship are eventually destroyed on this parent planet of ours.

If that dream of theirs ever does come true, it will probably be because our boys have the perspective and judgment that freedom and all it means brings.

They obey their field commander, but could replace him if he's shot down. They know more than just how to pull the trigger, or how to steer their tank or jeep. They need no opium to give them courage. They're scared, and if they see death coming they face it. And they're able to think. Since childhood they've known what a carburetor was.

**D**URING the last war on a small island in the Pacific a band of Marines landed to establish a beach-head. A Jap machine gun waited until they were all ashore, then mowed them down. At the first burst of fire they all dropped prone, these Marines. All except one. All of them were killed in a few seconds, except this one. His legs were mowed off above the knees. He fell, the bloody and bleeding stubs of his legs grinding into the sand. Calmly, his mind detached, he took the bayonet off his rifle and placed it between his teeth. Clawing into the sand he pulled himself forward toward the machine gun nest. He reached it, and plunged his bay-

onet into the belly of each of the Jap soldiers standing there, frozen into shocked paralysis. Moments later the second L.S.T. landed. The Marine received first aid, plasma by the quart, and was flown home, to later learn to walk on two artificial legs and wear his dress uniform again.

It may of course have been that madness animated him; but I don't think so. I think that he knew and accepted the "fact" that in half an hour he would be dead. Immediately he reached for and attained that plane of mental introspection where he could see himself as he really was, in time and space, just as we can and do in the cosmic panorama of science fiction. Words can't say what I'm trying to, but maybe you get their meaning. It wasn't courage, in a way. It was the same thing that comes over you when you're driving and see a car block you so that a collision and death seem certain, but without emotion you guide your car up a steep embankment and back down to the road again because that's the only thing that could be done.

Some people talk about science fiction being the cradle of ideas that later become atom bombs and guided missiles with which we win wars, as fans-grown-into-scientists make imagination into reality. I'm talking about science fiction as the medium that sets the mind free to roam the starways and view the panorama of the real and the imagined, when that FREE mind is confronted with something. It has the edge over a mind that has never had experience in soaring and pouncing and grasping of complexities, but is instead hemmed in by mental chains.

\* \* \*

In a moment you'll read the fanzine reviews written by Mari. Among those fanzines is undoubtedly one

edited by a fan who will soon be in the Service, using the same talents that he uses now to put his fanzine together, only using them to out-think the enemy, outmaneuver him, outguess him.

A fanzine, to me, is an important symbol of freedom of thought and unlimited mental horizons. But on a more down-to-earth level it is something everyone enjoys, from the editor with his mimeograph, to you . . . if you send for one of them. So why don't you? —*Rog Phillips*

\* \* \*

QUANDRY: 10c, \$1.00 a year; monthly; Lee Hoffman, 101 Wagner St., Savannah, Ga. Quandry's a year old now. More than that, by the time you read this. And for its anniversary it gives out a present—a really extra special issue of an always extra good fanzine. I'm referring to Issue 13, which is 99 pages of fiction, articles, verse, and pictures of little bowling pin men sliding down banisters. For non-subscribers this one particular issue costs a quarter instead of a dime, and since it has about four times as much in it as the other issues—well, you can see for yourself that it's the large economy size!

I don't know what I liked best. Maybe Stephen Craig's not the least bit ironic article on how to write a science fiction story. It's easy, according to Craig. Take a gray-eyed hero, a scientist's daughter, a Dark Sun (capitalized, so the editor and readers know it's a menace). Mix them all together, stirring in some villainous Sirians. Work out an ending. Then sell it.

Or if you'd rather read a story than write one, try Peter Ridley's "No Robbery," a parallel universe hunting tale with a twist.

Anyway, send for your copy. You will like being in a Quandry.

EXPLORER: 10c; bimonthly; Ed Noble, Jr.; Explorer, Box 49, Girard, Penna. Here's part of a letter Ed Noble sent me along with the June-July issue:

"Explorer is published by and for the ISFCC, International S-F Correspondence Club—this is a club of state-siders and overseas members all havin' a likin' for s-f, not holding to any great and high aims other than to encourage exchanging s-f views by way of letters and through the magazine. All material is written by club members . . . ISFCC always welcomes new members, of course—there are no dues to the club and the only financial requirement is subscription to the club magazine at 50c a year . . . Future issues will be enhanced by addition of the feminine touch when the future Mrs. Noble (as of Sept. 29th.) takes over the stencil typing . . ."

Congratulations!

Now I'm ready to tangle with Avis Melander over his article, "You've Got to Work to Get a Head." It's about, as you might guess from the title, headhunting and head-shrinking. It's fascinating, but . . .

My father knew quite a few headhunters. Jivaro Indians, on the nether side of the Andes. They didn't go to all the trouble of collecting tennis-ball sized human craniums for merely superstitious reasons. They were practical collectors. You, now, may collect s-f magazines or Cadillacs, but the Jivaro's wealth and social position are measured by the number of heads he keeps around the house. Also, by the number of wives he has, but the two go together. What girl could resist a man with a couple of dozen heads?

Also, Melander's recipe says you need three hot rocks to use while shrinking the head. You don't. A

lot of loose gravel, or even hot sand, works very well indeed. Local variations of custom, you know.

Father had a preshrunk head once, but Mother finally made him give it to a museum. He still has his own, though. Unshrunken. So if Melander wants to press the matter further, I'll turn him over to Dad . . .

\* \* \*

FAN-FARE: 15c; bi-monthly; W. Paul Ganley, 119 Ward Rd., N. Tonawanda, N. Y. As usual there are some good stories in this fiction fanzine. Eugene DeWeese works over the old idea of the super macrocosm from an interesting angle in "Experiment." Right after it, whether by intent or lucky accident I don't know, Toby Duane pursues another angle of the "what-is-the-universe anyway" theme in a very short, very good poem. It's called "An Idle Thought." Wonder what Duane would think up if he really worked at it?

\* \* \*

SCIENCE FICTION DIGEST: 25c; bi-monthly; Henry Burwell, 459 Sterling St. NE, Atlanta, Ga. This is a brand-new fanzine with a rather different approach. In fact, it's a reprint zine. There have been others in the past, but I don't know of any others now where you can catch up on the old classics of the fanzine world. The first issue of the Digest carries the often quoted article, Robert Bloch's "The Seven Ages of Fan" which no one should miss.

You'll find fan writers of both past and present represented, and you'll see for yourself what went on in the good old days. (Of course, in a few years 1952 will be the good old days, to be looked back to nostalgically . . .)

\* \* \*

CATAclysm: 10c; published irregularly; Bob Briney, 561 W. Western Ave., Muskegon Michigan. CAT is an all-poetry fanzine, probably the only one now left in the field. The summer issue contains top poems by many favorites among the fantasy verse writers—Andrew Duane, Orma McCormick and Michael De Angelis are just a few of them.

Along with this issue I got a letter from Bob Briney, part of which I want to pass along to you. He needs your help!

"Would you please mention that Cataclysm is in great need of contributions? We get enough poems to keep putting out issues fairly regularly, but there is no backlog from one issue to another . . . Material wanted is primarily fantasy and good science fiction themes, written according to at least the elementary rules of versification. No free verse or experimental verse unless exceptional. Send to the publisher's address (545 NE San Rafael, Portland 12, Oregon), as the editor is not yet settled in his college address . . ."

Look out, Bob. I might even send you some of my stuff . . .

\* \* \*

TORQUASIAN TIMES: 25c; published irregularly; R. H. Reneau & Walt Sauers, 1041 Cayuga St., Santa Cruz, Calif. This fanzine is put out by the Santa Cruz Torpid Torquasians, who certainly are far from torpid when it comes to putting out an issue. A lot of work went into this one. There's a fine cover by Wilcox, in the first place, that's really an eye-catcher.

The Torquasians really go out and gather in writing talent, too. They have Bradbury in the first issue, which you might still be able to get. In the second, or Fall issue, Russell Branch has a story called

"The Captain's Daughter," that's really good reading. A lot of other features that you'll enjoy, too. Try it.

\* \* \*

**FANATIC FANZINE:** 10c bimonthly; Bobby Pope, SW Hill and Hanover, Charleston, S. C. Here's another young fanzine with a lot of promise. I have only one bone to pick with the second issue—the July one. That is, I was reading happily along in a nice little story by David English, when all of a sudden the story breaks off and says "to be continued." Grr. I hope they send me issue number 3, so I can find out what happens . . .

You'll get a kick out of Fanatic, one of the huskiest of the new crop of young fanzines.

\* \* \*

**COSMAG:** 10c bimonthly; Ian Maccauley, 47 East Park Lane, Atlanta, Ga. The July issue of this zine, which is put out by the Atlanta Science Fiction Organization, has some of the funniest cartoons ever. Or I think so, anyway. Maybe I just like little aliens on the moon who're busy admiring the fuñ earth . . . Ian Maccauley has a good short-short in this issue, too. "The Scout." And there's even a fanzine review. Hmm. Someday someone should write a review of a review, and then someone else could review that! On second thought, no soap. That could start a sort of perpetual motion cycle . . .

\* \* \*

**TITANIA:** 25c; quarterly; Stan Serxner, 1308 Hoø Ave., Bronx, N. Y. Will Sykora's Queens Science Fiction League puts out this fanzine. In the Spring issue there are several good articles, including Murray Leinster's reminiscing on the early days of science fiction and his start in the field. Then, going from

past to future, Oscar Friend has an article about what will probably happen in science fiction during the next few years.

Unfortunately the mimeoing of Raymond Clancey's story in my copy was quite blurred and hard to read in spots. But it was a good story, once deciphered.

\* \* \*

**SINISTERRA:** 25c; quarterly; The Nameless Ones, 3200 Harvard N. Seattle 2, Wash. I don't see how The Nameless Ones manage to find the time to do all the things they do, including putting out so many good fanzines. Take the Number 4 Sinisterra, for example. It has a fine cover, as always, and a well-rounded table of contents. It's hard to pick out something to recommend particularly, but I know you'll enjoy Wally Weber's story "Servant Problem." And there's a different sort of story by Busby, "The Green Lensmen," which starts out to be the beginning of a serial, but ends by giving a synopsis of the concluding installments, just in case you were wondering how it all turned out.

\* \* \*

**OUTLANDER:** 15c; published irregularly; Rick Sneary, 2962 Santa Ana St., South Gate, Calif. Stan Woolston is the editor this time. It's a fine issue, though what Outlander isn't. (Plug. It's my favorite fanzine, of course, since if you've ever been an Outlander you're one forever in the spirit. Anyway, this issue runs to non-fiction. There's a tantalizing article by John Van Couvering about how the Outlander Society found and lost snick-snack day. Seems they found it in the dictionary—under snick—and they were going to celebrate it come May. Only when May came, snick-snack was no longer in the dictionary . . .



Hmm, thought I. Not a big enough dictionary. But our three ton unabridged one doesn't list it either, so I guess somebody was just seeing things.

Anyway, send in for your Outlander. You may even get a bonus **THE OUTLANDER NEWS REVIEW**, a brief newszine featuring west coast doings.

\* \* \*

**WOOMERA**: 15c 3/40c; American representative, Roger Nelson, 4070 Georgia, San Diego, Calif. Woomera is an Australian fanzine, published in Sydney. It's a printed zine, with some very good art work and attractive format. The February, '51 copy I have here is the first. It contains Graham Stone's "A Survey of Fan Affairs," which covers both Australia and the United States, and Roger Dard's "The British Prozines," which gives a history of British s-f. Then there's a directory of Australian fans—twenty-two listed, and they're scattered all over the continent. But they're certainly active.

If you're interested in learning more about fandom Down Under, get in touch with Roger Nelson. And get a copy of Woomera, too.

\* \* \*

**BLINDED THEY FLY**: This isn't a fanzine, really. It's a fantasy novelet by Australian fan Vic Molesworth. It's a paper-bound, printed, limited edition, and costs \$1.50. The U. S. agent is James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing, N. Y.

This story is in the Lovecraft tradition—fantasy, definitely on the weird, horror side. It would be of interest to collectors of this type of story, or to collectors of Australian fantasy in general, but the price, \$1.50 for thirty pages, is pretty steep for any others.

\* \* \*

**TIME STREAM**: 10c; quarterly; Time Stream Publications, 2403 6th. Ave., Columbus, Ga. Here's another new fanzine from the South, where a lot of new ones have been appearing lately. This one has three editors, Paul Cox, J. T. Oliver, and Van Splawn, and they've rounded up some good contributors. One is Lee Baldwin, who has a rather amusing little story called "That Martian, Kraushaar," that I think you'd like. You'd like the illustrations too.

\* \* \*

**FANTASY-TIMES**: 10c, 12/\$1.00; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. Here's the newspaper of science fiction, where you can find out what's happening in the s-f world right when it happens, instead of months later. It's a must if you want to keep up on what's going on in both the pro and fan fields. It's strictly a newszine, with complete coverage.

\* \* \*

**FAN-VET**: monthly; Ray Van Houten, 127 Spring St., Paterson 3, N. J. Fan-Vet reports on the progress of Fantasy Veterans Association, a group devoted to the interests of the fantasy fan in the U. S. Armed Forces. The organization supplies overseas fans with s-f literature they couldn't procure otherwise, a job that requires time and money. So if you have any s-f books, magazines, fanzines or cash you'll like to donate for some fan who is overseas, perhaps in Korea, Ray Van Houten would be most happy to see that they're sent where they'll really be appreciated.

\* \* \*

**FANTOPICS**: 10c; published irregularly; Fred Hatfield, 7620 Abbot Ave., Miami Beach 41, Fla. Fred Hatfield writes me that this first issue of Fantopics is his first pub-

lication in the fan field. It's hard to believe, because it's a beautifully put-together zine. It's small, compact, expertly printed by photo offset, and has some really good artwork—and on the production end at least, it's a one-man job! Good work, Fred.

Fantopics is subtitled "Music and Stf," and contains a nice balance of these ingredients. David Keller has an article, "Barter," and in it he says that Fantopics plans to become a sort of swap center for those interested in the two fields. Have any magazines you want to trade for jazz records? If so, write in.

\* \* \*

EUSIFANSO: 10c; published irregularly; Rosco Wright, 146 E. 12th. Ave., Eugene, Oregon. This is the fanzine put out by the Eugene Science Fantasy Artisans. It always runs to good art work, and the July issue is no exception.

There's a rather intriguing story in the issue, "The Mugwump Tree." The author's name isn't given, but you're obviously expected to know who it is. I don't. Anyway, the Tree was quite a likeable character.

\* \* \*

NEWSSCOPE: 5c, 50c a year; monthly; Laurence Ray Campbell, 43 Tremont St., Malden 48, Mass. This is a good little newszine covering the fan world, fan doings, as well as what's going on—in the fantasy line of course—on the radio, in the movies and in magazines. The recent issue carries a report on the Westercon, in California, and there'll be future coverage of the Nolacon and the coming Chicon No. 2.

\* \* \*

SLUDGE: Bob Foster: 2 Spring Gardens, Southwick, Brighton, Sussex, England. The price of this excellent British fanzine is three issues

of Sludge for one current U. S. promag or two shillings in cash. I suggest you send the magazine.

It's a lot of fun to pick up a foreign fanzine you've never seen before—this is the number 2 issue of Sludge—and see how universal the interest in science fiction really is. Fans seem to be pretty much the same the world over.

This issue of Sludge contains several stories you'll like, as well as a most amusing article by Dan Morgan, who tells you most solemnly just how science fiction has gone about ruining his social life.

\* \* \*

SCIENCE FICTION NEWSLETTER: 15c, 7/\$1.00; bi-monthly; Bob Tucker, Box 260, Bloomington, Ill. The new issue of the Newsletter covers the London World Science Fiction Convention, including photographs taken during the convention. It's an experimental issue, experimenting with a smaller page size and different format. I think it looks better than ever the new way—and it's always been a top newszine.

\* \* \*

FANTASY ADVERTISER: 15c; bi-monthly; 1745 Kenneth Road, Glendale 1, Calif. This is primarily an advertising medium, carrying ads for everything from professional book publications to a fan's offer to sell a couple of mid-1930's magazines. In addition, there are always excellent book reviews and occasional articles on science fiction trends and writers.

\* \* \*

CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER: Chester Cuthbert, 54 Ellesmere Ave., St. Vital, Manitoba. This newsletter gives information about fan activities and fan clubs in Canada, with different clubs being written

up in each issue. The Association is preparing to publish a directory of Canadian fans which will be included in the third Newsletter. The Association is becoming increasingly active, with organizations in many different cities, and any Canadian fans interested in joining are urged to contact Chester Cuthbert right a-way.

\* \* \*

**STEF HEADLINEWS:** 20 issues 50c; twice a month; Walter A. Coslet, Box 6, Helena, Montana. This is a postcard newszine, crammed with a brief resume of what's been going on in the science fiction world. The card I have here, number 1, lists recent book publications, the non s-f magazines now running s-f stories, and recent fanzines. Quite a lot of information in a minimum of space.

\* \* \*

**DIFFERENT:** 50c; Lilith Lorraine, Different, Rogers, Arkansas. The Autumn 1951 issue is the last, for a while anyway, as the magazine is being suspended. Actually, Different has never been exactly a fanzine, but what has been called a "little" magazine, one dedicated to raising the cultural standards of fantasy prose and poetry. As such, I know its own particular fans will miss it, for it has really lived up to its name.

\* \* \*

**THE COMMITTEEMAN:** Roy and Deedee Lavender, Box 132, Delaware, Ohio. The Committeeman is

of interest to NFFF members (National Fantasy Fan Federation, the biggest fan organization in the country). It's published every once in a while, and contains news about NFFF members, new members, and officials, as well as comments on other fanzines.

\* \* \*

**STF TRADER:** 2/15c or 4/25c; monthly; Jack Irwin, Box 3, Tyro, Kansas. The Trader is devoted exclusively to fantasy and s-f ads, handling all offers to buy, sell or swap magazines, books, or anything else in the field. If you're interested in adding to your collection, or if you have fantasy material to sell, here's where you can contact fans who can help you out.

\* \* \*

**W**ELL, I've finally reached the bottom of the Box. A lot of fanzines this time, including several just starting up. You know, it's a lot of work putting out a fanzine, and the fan who does this work isn't making money out of it. His satisfaction comes from having other people read and enjoy what he's created—from having *you* read his fanzine and letting him know you liked it. As Rog said earlier, Why don't you?

Remember, if you have a fanzine you'd like reviewed here, send it to me—Mari Wolf, Fandora's Box, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. See you next issue!

—Mari Wolf

## **WATCH FOR THESE GREAT SCIENCE FICTION STORIES:**

**"THIS WORLD IS OURS!"**

*by* EMIL PETAJA

**FINAL EXAMINATION**

*by* ROBERT SHECKLEY

**THE COSMIC BLUFF**

*by* MACK REYNOLDS

**PLUS MANY OTHER GREAT STORIES BY  
TOP SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS — IN IMAGINATION**

# Letters

## from the Readers

### THAT NOVEMBER EDITORIAL!

Dear Editor:

Your editorial for November, 1951, setting up as it did your editorial policy, has virtually ruined my faith in human nature.

I have been a SCIENCE fiction fan for many years, and have spent a considerable amount of effort wading through science FICTION for the occasional good stories that crop up concerning a logical development of science. I have long since given up on the scientific (?) pulp magazines with lurid covers—knowing full well that all I can expect from them are a series of more or less corny space operas.

Fortunately, there are some fairly good magazines out that are tending toward a more and more logical outlook into the future, which I have come to associate with your type of format. I used to think that the lack of good stories was the fault of the authors, who were probably ignorant of scientific principles. But now I'm confronted with an editor who virtually states: *To hell with Science — it's the Story that counts!* (I might add that the stories in the November issue, though not as bad as the pulp magazines I spoke of,

live up to that statement.)

Before making your policy irrevocable, please bear in mind two points: 1, There are many scientific people in this world (needless to say, potential readers) who would writhe at the thought, for instance, of a boy born of normal parents with "wires and glass things" in his body. And 2, from the sale of true adventure stories, one might concur that some people prefer their stories logical. Hopefully . . .

Walter Yingling Irving  
1007 Broad St.  
Newark 2, N.J.

\* \* \*

Dear Mr. Hamling:

This is in regard to your extensive editorializing anent what you choose to call "science fiction" in your November editorial. The junk that you and others are guilty of peddling under the guise of "science" fiction is none of that, though it may be any one of a number of other things — fantasy, adventure, space opera, you name it. None of the stories I've found in your, and other, science fiction magazines has had more than just the barest hint of any of the "sciences", pseudo, or

otherwise to justify the appellation of SCIENCE fiction. Even my two favorites, of which yours is not one, quite often stray from being strictly SCIENCE fiction.

I admit that the general reading public cannot decipher even the simplest of technical language, and will fling away in disgust anything they cannot understand; but by far the largest portion of the readers of SCIENCE fiction have at least a partial understanding of some of the basic facts of our sciences. I am not an "educated" person, as most people understand the word educated, but through the medium of the so-called SCIENCE FICTION magazines I've been led to a world of knowledge I might never have known existed, had it not been for these magazines.

I do like to be entertained; I like to read fantasy-adventure stories, but I also like to read those stories that jog my thinking, that give me new information in new guises and add to my store of intrinsic knowledge.

I was, for a long time, a great reader of western and detective fiction. But when the so-called "science fiction" stories came along, I deserted them for more informative reading. My greatest interest, now, lies in the fields of psychology and human behavior, and, stories dealing with such subjects.

Clarence R. McFarland, Jr.  
3612 15th Ave., West  
Seattle 99, Wash.

\* \* \*

Dear Ed:

I am not a very voluble fan, but have been an ardent one for a long time. If I were so inclined, I could hurl a few barbs as well as a few roses in your direction, but on the

whole, I think your handling of Madge has been definitely above average. Although I begin to detect a not-very-pleasant FA and AS flavor in recent issues.

You will doubtless consider it very insolent of me to offer you a few words of advice; but at the risk of incurring your displeasure, I will.

Certainly you have reason to be proud of AS and FA during your tenure of office in editing them, but you certainly have no reason to be proud of them now. AS & FA have deteriorated sadly since the days of WLH and RAP. To carry the policies of the current pilots of AS & FA over into Madge will destroy it as surely as the sun rises.

You may consider me as one of the "critics" ensconced in lofty ivory towers", but I would have you remember that the prophets of doom are not always wrong. There are quite a few "critics" among the SF fans in this country. If you don't believe me, check the current circulation figures of AS and FA. It's going to get worse for them. If you want to see Madge succeed, and I am sure you do, the best policy will be to make Madge *unique*, instead of a pocket imitation of Ziff-Davis.

I don't consider arrogance or flippancy very becoming to an editor. The fans are the editor's bread and butter. The fans *want* to see a magazine succeed because we consider them *our* magazines. When an editor answers a fan in an offending manner, he not only affronts that fan, but also many others.

Wishing you the best of success in making Madge the Leader in its field . . .

L. W. Carpenter, D.D.S.  
Franklin Clinic  
Elizabethton, Tenn.

Dear Bill:

You've got praises coming on the November Madge. Seventy-eight pages of them. After yelping down his collar, beating him in his sleep, etc., I finally achieved my goal. I got Bob (Geoff St. Reynard) Krepps to write a sequel to one of the best stories I ever read. Of course, being broadminded, I give you a little credit for worming BEWARE, THE USURPERS! out of Bob. Anyway, I sure was happy to see it. What a masterpiece! Now what say we get him to do a sequel to the sequel—RETURN OF THE USURPERS, no less.

More praise comes for the cover. Indeed, it was a thing of beauty. I think that it was by far the best cover published anywhere in many months.

But now that the praises are over, I'd like to disagree most vehemently with your editorial.

It always irks me no end to hear somebody, especially with a good background like yours, talk of taking the science out of science fiction. I agree that some stories, very good ones, are written without the least bit of science in them, but can't you stretch your viewpoint a little and see these as fantasy fiction? Now don't get me wrong, I love it at times. But would you reject a story just because a kindergartner maybe couldn't understand the scientific background?

As far as I know, Madge caters to neither science fiction or fantasy, rather a combination of the two. Therefore, you could, with the greatest of ease publish a stf epic by an advanced scientist, involving several theories of his own; also, a good old-fashioned—and I mean good—weird fantasy.

ASTOUNDING, at times, prints good stories involving vast scientific

concepts. Yet they are the type of stories that seem to boost the magazine to the proverbial 1st or 2nd slot.

WEIRD TALES, on the other hand prints good stories lacking any iota of science.

Why can't Madge combine these two related styles and drop the childish argument over which is the best? You've undoubtedly got the second best format in the business, a usually good cover, the best back cover in the business, and, with Geoff St. Reynard doing feature work for you, one of the best authors. Why louse up such a fine magazine by not including stories that are not scientifically plausible?

As you said, Geoff St. Reynard knows how to write an entertaining story. Would you reject one of his because a practical or known scientific fact was played on?

Yes, IMAGINATION has come a long way since you took over its reins, but with a policy like you announced it wouldn't take long to backtrack. Horrid thought, isn't it?

Hoping to see some *science* fiction in Madge . . .

Bobby Pope  
SW Hill & Hanover Sts.  
, Charleston, S. C.

\* \* \*

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I doubt seriously whether you were in full possession of your faculties when you wrote that November editorial. Are you really responsible for that "Idiot's Delight?" Of course the trend is away from the "I will save you from the BEM and kiss your red lips" type of story. As August Derleth wrote in the introduction to FAR BOUNDARIES: "Science fiction writers of the present time are immeasur-

ably superior in the intelligent presentation of themes and handling of materials to the writers who preceded them."

Certainly this is not the fault of "blood and thunder space opera" or "Voluptuous Science Stories".

Concerning the movie angle, you say that fast action westerns have made millions of dollars because "the majority of moviegoers wanted that type of entertainment." Are you aware of the average age of moviegoers? 12 years! Yes, that's right, 12 years old and hip, hip, hooray for Captain Viedo!

I know that you have heard this scores of times, but isn't it logical that people with a supposedly higher than normal IQ would want exceptional, better-than-average movies and stories? At any rate, it's human to err, and to forgive is divine. So you're forgiven, but just this once, mind you!

Now to get down to the meat and potatoes of Madge. To borrow an expression from Mr. Derleth, Madge is "immeasurably superior" to the greater number of its contemporaries. This includes ASTOUNDING, although GALAXY is nearly even with you. You have a very fine chance of hitting the "unchallenged number 1 position"—and soon! Your format is excellent and there are no words to adequately describe those magnificent covers. This goes double for FANDORA'S BOX and your great stories.

Much to my regret I missed the April 1950 issue with the Ray Bradbury story. This is unforgivable, so enclosed find 35c for a back issue. I hope you publish this letter as I'm anxious to find out what other fans think of the "mature stf controversy". Yours for a better (if it's possible to improve on perfection) Madge.

John Gatto  
42 Oakland Ave.  
Uniontown, Pa.

\* \* \*

Dear Ed:

Notwithstanding my high regard for IMAGINATION, I'm afraid I have a bone to pick with you. In fact, I might venture to say that I'm boiling mad. Why? Because of your November editorial. Lots of editors are denouncing the higher grade of stf that is starting to predominate in some of the better magazines today, and finally, I'm going to say something in rebuttal.

You seem to have the wrong idea of what adult science fiction is. According to your editorial, you think it is comprised of stories dealing with the solving of Man's current problems by projecting them into the future. You think its sole aim is to educate the readers.

How wrong you are.

To begin with, let's define the words science fiction. Freely translated they mean "fiction based on science". True adult science fiction is exactly that—fiction based on science. And logical science, not the run of the mill clap-trap you find generally nowadays.

A story does not have to be intellectual to be adult. Nor does an adult story necessarily have to have very much science. Many adult stories published today concern themselves mainly with the reactions of mankind to different environment.

Now understand, these are not true adult stf stories, rather, they are adult science-fantasy. This has its own place in the science-fiction-fantasy-weird field today. So does so-called space opera, frowned upon by many, but usually good for a

little lighter reading between more complex stories.

Science fiction is, as you say, primarily a field of fiction designed to entertain. The formula space opera is not science fiction, however. I'd classify it as fantasy. Stories concerning certain devices and not containing an explanation of same are usually fantasy also. However, there are exceptions, such as stories written around time-machines. Very little is known about the construction of such a machine so it is not fair to expect the author to include an explanation. Usually this type is science-fantasy.

You seem to take the view that adult stf is not entertaining. I say it is just as entertaining as any other type of science fiction, depending on the likes and dislikes of the reader. Adult science fiction need not go way over the head of the reader, in fact, it shouldn't. It simply is that branch of stf which is based on logical, understandable assumptions.

From what I've heard around San Francisco, you're getting quite a panning over the present editorial, and also about your claiming THE THING was better than DESTINATION MOON. As Mrs. Frances Rand put it in her letter in this month's reader's column, "It seems that some people are so shallow they cannot appreciate the drama of human endeavor and experience."

About THE THING, anything containing such old worn-out characters as the mad scientist and busty gal, such a hackneyed villain as an eight-foot sentient vegetable, and with a flying saucer thrown in for good measure has to have a terrific plot or something else to boost it up to being passable to me. I gather you thought the suspense was just such an extra something. Not so around

this neck o' the woods, podnuh.

Terry Carr

134 Cambridge St.  
San Francisco 12, Cal.

\* \* \*

Dear Mr. Hamling:

It is rare indeed that an editorial of any sort can raise this lethargic beast to his typewriter. I feel, however, that some defense of the "adult-erizers" of science fiction must be made. Your primary point: that one seeks relaxation in reading science fiction or fantasy is well taken—here are grounds for agreement. The element of doubt only comes into the picture when you deal with the opinion of those who demand *adult* science fiction. I think it is merely a mistaken interpretation of the desires of this group that has led you to speak as you do.

I feel that I am a member of this group and as such can speak my small part, in the hope that others will agree with me. I do not think that the so-called *adult* story is printed as an editor's desire to show up the stupidity of the readers. By doing this an editor will eventually find himself with no readers at all. Even the bold Mr. Gold of GALAXY, whose attitude seems to annoy several of your fans, prefers to compliment rather than antagonize the intelligence of those who buy his magazine.

Secondly, your public will not silently steal away to the domain of westerns or other escapist literature. All fiction is escapist. We read for the most part subjectively, not like the cold analytical machines. I do not think the public will desert, mainly because the public has changed. Think back, can you still read with relish the stories of early childhood? One begins to grow tired of



the same hackneyed plots, the same catch phrases. I enjoyed what would be the thud and blunder space opera at the age of twelve, but I'm stiff from seeing authors draw the same old irons out of the fire. An example, if you please, CRY CHAOS! in the September issue of Madge. I've read that story a thousand times before. Adult science fiction to me is a story which does not roast the same old chestnuts.

A final word, I have noticed that you apparently base your opinion on the mail you receive. Unfortunately the more vocal element seems to be booming for a return of things on the level of Captain Future. As a member of what I believe to be the far too silent majority, let me warn you not to allow Madge to be controlled by a vigorous minority. Let's hear thunder from the silent ranks. More letters from John Sharp, rather than a series of approvals on a previous edition.

In closing, allow me to congratulate Malcolm Smith on a really striking cover on the November issue. He deserves a warm hand.

Edward M. Cohen  
492 Sheffield Ave.  
Brooklyn 7, N. Y.

\*

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Your editorial in the November 1951 issue of IMAGINATION is a bit misleading, although I believe your purpose is sincere. You mention something about science fiction growing up. I think you mean it is growing down.

Your editorial is interesting and thought-provoking, but I think you do not say what you mean to say.

As I see it there are two types of stories being printed today under the guise of science fiction. One is

the pure, pukka, dyed-in-the-wool original science fiction story, the real science fiction. This is the type that got its name because its writers abandoned the standard plots, and struck out to find plots in a growing technology.

The other type is a plot with a pseudo-scientific or futuristic setting—the adventure type story laid on Mars, etc. This is the over-worked type, and perhaps the general public does not tire of it, but I do. I like realism, originality and differentness to challenge me and leave me something after I finish reading a story. I like new ideas, something to chew on. And I like to learn.

You speak of high-brow literature and movies; you claim that people do not want to be educated when they read. I do not think that science fiction is intended to educate anyone *who does not want to be educated*.

The interesting facet here is that, although you seem to say that the public desires "bad" literature, your own editing belies that inference. So far I have just read BEWARE THE USURPERS! in the November issue. There is a story that has all the literary merits you mention, besides being an excellent fantasy. It is not science fiction, but then it need not be. Krepps (St. Reynard) may not have a scientific education, but he is a good writer. So he does not try and fill his story with a lot of pseudo-scientific props but turns out a neat fantasy that I liked a lot.

Probably you are attacking the tendency toward the insipid, "psychosociological" type of stf which I dislike reading myself—the dry and nonsensical type of thing that reads like Freudian and socialistic propaganda.

I would like to put in my two-bits worth, however, for the good old-fashioned SLAN type of science fiction, which type I rate over all others. If you could include one or two of them maybe even the public would go for them. Huh?

Bill Venable  
610 Park Place  
Pittsburgh 9, Pa.

\* \* \*

*It would seem we were more subtle than out-spoken in our last editorial. Actually, we said more or less exactly what Bill Venable concludes: we attacked the psycho-sociological type of stf. For the record, we never intended to advocate taking science out of science fiction—as accepted terminology in the field goes. A good science fiction story needs science for its background, in one degree or another. However, we call science fiction any story in which probable events take place in light of present scientific knowledge or theories. Thus, BEWARE THE USURPERS is not fantasy. It is a story of another dimension. The fact that Krepps did not bother to become involved in a scientific "breakdown" of that dimension did not make it fantasy. Here, it was the story that counted—as it always should be. Our objections were aimed at the "snob" appeal types that are being foisted on the general public in some circles.*

*As far as Madge is concerned, rest assured you'll find well-written, well-thoughtout stories every issue. You will not find the snooty "lecture" type yarn. That type may make an interesting article, but for our money it's not a good story. And we intend to provide good stories!—As Madge has been doing . . .*  
wlh

## HIT THE NAIL ON THE HEAD!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

It was truly a pleasure to read, and re-read your November editorial. No one has hit the proverbial nail on the head so well as you! Oh, yes, I read Howard Browne's editorial in AS too, but my first statement still goes.

This condition, which science fiction is beginning to find itself in, is not a good one by any means!

Surely a person who has a definite thirst for knowledge (as we all do) will not expect or attempt to find it in a land of make-believe—which stf is by its very nature. (Isn't fiction just that?)

Some people persist in the idea that we must all be changed into scientists or technicians before we can be "adult" science fiction followers. I say we are addicted to science fiction for the sake of entertainment—just as others are in their love of westerns, detective stories, love stories, etc. Let's leave the educating to the educators.

I guess I am running over with enthusiasm, but your editorial hit me between the eyes. I am just trying to say that as long as we have editors like you and magazines like IMAGINATION we shouldn't have too much to worry about.

As for the stories in the November issue, BEWARE THE USURPERS! was a humdinger. THE OLD WAY was also very good. And I loved that cover! Let's have more like this one!

Incidentally, if there are any "hams" who care to swap old issues, etc., be glad to hear from them.

Joseph F. Dwyer  
W2WKK  
35 Manor Rd.  
Denville, N. J.

*Thanks for the nod, Joe. Madge is an "adult" magazine—we just insure real entertainment . . . with*

### A FOND SALUTE . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I have just finished the November issue of Madge and I haven't had the pleasure of enjoying a magazine anymore in years! Madge is going to take the place of the greatest fantasy magazine of them all, UNKNOWN WORLDS. I am sure that the majority of readers who so dearly loved that magazine will agree with me.

I especially liked your editorial. You have said what I would like to say, only better. Science and fantasy fiction are, first and last, escape literature. True they should contain realism, but also a generous amount of "what if? . . ." and real make-believe. We who have dearly loved fantasy since the early Burroughs and Merritt salute you fondly for your stand in favor of really good escape literature.

Wilkie Conner  
1618 McFarland Ave.  
Gastonia, N. C.

*We've always loved UNKNOWN WORLDS too. You may rest assured that there will be many great fantasy stories in Madge — along with the best in science fiction . . .*

*....with*

### DON'T GO HIGH-BROW!

Dear Editor:

I would like to give you a word of praise for your delightful magazine, IMAGINATION. The stories are good—so I will not bother rating them.

I would like to see you use long novels, even if they have to be continued as serials. I think readers

can enjoy serials—by reading each part as published and spending the interim plotting the story mentally and comparing notes later when it is read next issue . . .

*Please* never go high-brow. Your November editorial concerned this subject. Keep up the good work you have been doing—choose stories in keeping with your title. But remember, none of the so-called "high-brow" material.

If any reader has copies of AS before 1936 I'm interested—if they're not too high priced!

Alton Maddux  
Garner, Texas

*No high-brow or low-brow, Alton. Just solid entertainment—the best!*

*...with*

### A GREAT SMITH COVER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I've just finished reading the November issue of Madge. (By the way, I received the back issues I requested on my subscription. Thanks for sending them by return mail—what service!)

This issue was really good. Every one of the stories was good. But "good" doesn't apply to BEWARE THE USURPERS! by Geoff St. Reynard. It was wonderful! I was kept in suspense all the way. I would like to read the original story, THE USURPERS. Where can I find it?

Also, I thought the GIFT and PLAYMATE were very good. And Malcolm Smith did a superb job on the front cover. It is the best cover you have ever had—but then, Smith always does a good job! Malcolm is much better than Hannes Bok or even Hinton.

By the way, get more stories by Richard Matheson.

Paul Craft  
19 Rio Vista Rd.  
Richmond, Va.

*This will answer quite a few readers who have written in asking for information on the original USURPER story. We ran it in the January 1950 issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES when we edited that magazine. If you write to Z-D you might be able to get a copy, or try your back number book and magazine dealer . . . with*

### ANOTHER "FIRST" LETTER

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I could start this letter by saying that this is my first letter, etc. As a matter of fact it is my first letter, and maybe my last, but I would like to go on record as being a science fiction fan of long standing—and a fan of IMAGINATION, thus the letter.

I will refrain from commenting on the stories. They are to my liking or I would not be buying the magazine. Besides, their praises will be echoed and re-echoed by many others.

I do like the INTRODUCING THE AUTHORS series. I especially liked Geoff St. Reynard in the November issue. He sure gets that light touch of humor in his writing!

One more thing, I have finally made a fan of my husband. It took a lot of doing but by keeping nothing but stf around the house I got him to break down and read Madge. The rest you know!

In closing, all I want to say is keep up the good work and believe me, I'll keep buying!

Dolly Kenison  
P. O. Box 622  
Tularosa, New Mex.

*Welcome into the fold, Dolly, and let's hear from you again soon.*

*And even better—how about getting hubby to break down even further and write a letter! . . . with*

### AN EPIDEMIC, SHE SAYS!

Hi, Bill Hamling!

It's your own fault if you don't like Madge fans being familiar. You are friendly and informal in your editorials and comments on letters, so . . .

Two stories in the November issue were tops. THE GIFT & PLAYMATE. THE GIFT is the kind of story that makes pleasurable goose-pimples pop through even pancake makeup. Dropping IMAGINATION on your lap after reading, you can't help thinking it's fantasy, but you wonder how many Carl Sloans we've collectively performed spiritual and personality lobotomys on because they were gifted individuals and we were too smugly ignorant to understand!

Einstein in primitive Pago Pago would have had little opportunity to use his mathematical wizardry in computing yam yields. He would have been banned from the communal society for inability to adjust. A pen full of black chickens will peck a single white one to death while the rooster crows that the flock has been preserved.

PLAYMATE touches the same theme from a less powerful angle, the need to hide the difference. The white hen finding a nice grimy coal bin.

Now on this business of science fiction and the howl that it must grow up, become mature. I don't see anything to get in a tizzy about. It's an epidemic we're having like kids touching each other's mumps so that they too can have them! Who wants mumps?

All of which exhausts the steam

behind my tooting for today. More power to IMAGINATION!

Alice Bullock  
812 Gildersleeve  
Santa Fe, New Mex.

*Hey, now, Alice, maybe you have something in this epidemic theory. . . . Hey, Maw! Pass the penicillin—the bugs are loose again! . . . with*

#### "NATIVE" KOREA FANS!

Dear Mr. Hamling.

I assume by now you are happily aware of the fact that science fiction has caught on. And you realize too that your readers are scattered quite well over this planet.

But did you realize that there are many native science fiction fans in Korea? (South, of course!) There are!

Our interpreter was a school teacher here before the war disrupted what infinitesimal system they did have, and he is intelligent and extremely well educated. He has read English and American literature and is well acquainted with the average float-with-the-tide American mags as well as the slicks. He is quite bored with most of them.

But when I produced the November issue of IMAGINATION he went as wild as a Martian! He is now an ultra-fan—as are the other Koreans he has translated the magazine to. (I think I should add that Malcolm Smith's cover had a lot to do in initially impressing him!)

The Smith photo-cover is the most striking, progressively stylish and most spectacular cover I have ever seen! A real masterpiece . . .

I have read the stories three times now and am anxiously awaiting my next issue. I enjoyed all the stories, though I'm not sure that THE OWL AND THE APE belongs

in Madge. What do you other fans think?

I was a fan before going into the Service but had not discovered Madge while Stateside. Now a friend of mine sends me a copy every issue. (I don't subscribe simply because my address changes too frequently!) I am looking forward to future issues of your fine magazine. So is Korea!

Herbert B. Smith  
AF 15279206

8th Air Installation Sq.  
8th Ftr.-Bmr. Wing  
APO 970, c/o PM,  
San Francisco, Cal.

*It certainly is nice to know that native Koreans like science fiction, and Madge in particular! As to subscribing, Herb, don't worry about a change of address for Madge's subscription dept. We have the fastest service in the publishing field—and we mean that—we enter and ship magazines the same day the subscription comes in—and the same goes for changes of address. No magazine we know of can equal or better that kind of service! So go ahead and subscribe . . . with*

#### HE WANTS ENTERTAINMENT

Dear Ed:

Your November issue of Madge is the third one I've been able to find up here in Canada. It was a very entertaining issue.

I am glad to see that BEWARE THE USURPERS! took up half the book because I prefer long stories.

In regard to your editorial, for quite awhile I have been reading stories like THE GOLDEN AMAZON by John Russell Fearn, I believe, and the rest of the series by this author. I call this entertainment—the kind you spoke of. What do you think? In fact, it was stories

like this that got me interested in science fiction.

IMAGINATION and MARVEL SCIENCE FICTION are the only two science fiction magazines I care for. (MSF is never mentioned in your letters—isn't it popular with American fans?) To me, GALAXY seems as if it is intended for professors only.

Please keep IMAGINATION the way it is—an entertaining and fine science fiction magazine.

Donald Howes  
458 Melrose Ave.

Verdun, P. Q., Canada

*It's been quite a while since we read the Fearn Stories, but we did enjoy them. They are examples of good entertainment. Let us hear from you again soon . . . . . with*

#### A FINE ST. REYNARD STORY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Well, I am taking up the challenge of Al Rosen, asking where the Canadian readers are! This is my first letter, so greetings to one and all.

I'd like to say that I give top

spot to IMAGINATION. I read all the science fiction magazines I can get but I'll stick to your magazine and you can bet I read it from cover to cover!

In the November issue BEWARE THE USURPERS! was really a fine story. Having spent 15 years in England I was quite at home with the "props" and the unfolding of the plot. Geoff is a great writer and I'd like to see a lot more of his work.

The cover was very attractive too. I was "drawn" by "The Lady With the Pink Eyes!"

I'll look forward to coming issues, knowing they'll be as good as previous ones. You beat the other science fiction magazines all hollow!

Alex Jolley  
313 Wilson St.

Peterborough, Ont.

Canada

*It's good to hear from you, Alex, and by all means continue dropping us a line. As to Geoff St. Reynard, he writes for Madge and the sticks. You can count on seeing more of his work soon . . . . . with*

\* \* \*

## FANTASY FILM FLASHES

*By Forrest J. Ackerman*

FROM *A-Men to Zombies of the Stratosphere*, the silver screen in 1952 is scheduled to be increasingly concerned with the film of fantascience. In fact, IMAGINATION may well be represented in the scientific parade with its lead novel of last issue. Kris Neville's alien invasion hit, *Special Delivery*, was immediately taken under consideration by an Eagle-Lion producer.

Fans will be familiar with the titles of great science fiction stories which are being studied by Studio story departments and independent film makers in the rush to repeat the gratifying success of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. A. E. Van Vogt's *Slan* and *The Shadow Men* are both being considered as cinema sales, and L. Ron Hubbard's novella about *The Tramp* with mitogenic eyes is also being examined for film possibilities.

George Orwell's 1984 has been optioned and should prove one of the top productions of the year.

Monogram is following up its *Flight To Mars* with *Voyage To Venus*, in super-cinecolor. *Radar Men From the Moon*, *Superman On Earth*, and *Superman vs. the Mole Men* will provide serial fare for those who care. Beware, however, of *Swords of Venus*, a misleading title which unfortunately has nothing to do with stf. But an "A" film with three stars has been announced with the title, *Rocket Ship to Mars*. Academy award winner, John Ford, has been mentioned in connection with a *Men From Mars*, a *Bandits of the Moon* is being bandied about, and this year Abbott & Costello meet the Martians!

The *A-Men* mentioned in the opening paragraph will be the screen's first cybernetic story. By Curt Siodmak, famous for his *Floating Platform No. 1*, *Donovan's Brain*, and many other scientific films.

ON the Burroughs front, various Tarzan titles have been announced for filming: *Tarzan the Hunted*, *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, and *Tarzan's Savage Fury*. Also ERB's *Cave Girl* will cavort through a new series.

An atomic prophecy entitled 1965 is planned, and Paramount has a hush-hush project on the (atomic) fire titled: *Los Alamos*.

Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island* has been brought up to date as a cliff-hanger.

*Lady In Space . . . Lost In Space . . . Morning Star* (by John Spencer Carr) . . . *Tomorrow . . . Dead Planet . . . Plague* (introducing Rene Lafayette's Ole Doc Methuselah) . . . *A Place To Hide . . . Land of the Mist . . . The Gamma People* (artificially mutated supermen) . . . on

and on the tide rushes.

Arch Oboler is planning a tour de force in *Spear In the Sand*, a French novel (also published in this country) about one real character stranded at 25 on a desert island. Accompanied only by the creatures his brain conceives, he lives in this imaginary world until his death at 90. And Oboler will make an even more daring leap into the fantastic when he does Lewis Padgett's famous *Twonky*, about the servo-mechanism from the 4th dimension that slips thru a temporal snag into the present and first serves and then slays the occupants of a house.

*City Beneath the Sea*—don't confuse it with the new Bob Tucker book. Its an "original", though how original remains to be seen.

After *Francis Covers the Big Town*, *Francis Goes to West Point*.

*It Grows On Trees* will be a comedy about a horticulturist who discovers a tree that literally grows that green stuff—money!

J. Sheridan LeFanu is up for filming with *The Green Man*. William Cox is preparing the script for a *Science Fiction Trio*.

The title of *I Conquered the Sun*, the spectacular solar scientific film by Albert De Pina, has been changed, since my last report to you, to *I Captured the Sun*. Another title change: *I'll Always Remember You* replaces *Beyond Time and Space*, the travel backward picture adapted from the play, *Berkeley Square*.

*Run For the Hills* will treat the H-Bomb threat humorously. In my opinion that should be spelled humorously!

With the success of the Balmer-Wylie collaboration, *When Worlds Collide*, Paramount should look to its files for an original script it owns by Philip Wylie, *Fifty Years From Now*, and Universal would do well to pro-

duce *The Billionaire*, which it bought from Edwin Balmer when Lassie was a pup. And I'd like to make a prediction at this time: It won't be long before some perceptive producer sees the hit possibilities in Wylie's *The Disappearance*.

Climaxing in a lost world where remnants of prehistoric monsters menace the cast, *Destination Unknown* will be presented in technicolor. Original story by stf writer, Albert De Pina.

And here we go again: *Road To Mars . . . Mission Accomplished . . . The Man He Found . . . Jack and the Beanstalk . . . Lady From Venus . . . Spaceship to Saturn . . . Penguin Island . . . Project No. 7 . . . Professor Hagge's Private Planet . . . Finian's Rainbow . . . The Stray Lamb . . . Thunder From the Stars . . . The Legend of Good Women . . . The Boys From Syracuse . . . The 7 Souls of Clement O'Reilly . . . and The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T!*—yes, all these have been announced for future (near future) production! At this rate it will soon be fantastic to find a western, musical, or mystery on a double-bill!

THE other day a producer came to my home to find a property to buy. He was looking for something along the superman line, so I naturally steered him to *Odd John*. He surprised me by informing me he understood the Stapledon classic was already optioned. He then took Stanley Weinbaum's *New Adam* from my library and I briefed him on it. He returned a few days later with a couple of interested parties, and at the present time they are also considering *The Vicarion*, *The Four-Sided Triangle*, *What Mad Universe*, and an original—by my wife and myself—*Suicide Satellite*. At this writing, *The Vicarion*, and *The*

*Four-Sided Triangle* are the two hottest properties around Hollywood, with Universal, George Pal (of *When Worlds Collide*) and a number of independent producers (including one Academy award winner) all considering one or both.

It is my opinion that there is an Oscar for the right actress in the twin role afforded by the Temple "Triangle" (so popular that it has sold 7 times in fiction format); and *The Vicarion*—the invention that supersedes films and TV—is a natural. The latter is a book that sold 16,000 copies over 25 years ago! It has since been syndicated throughout the nation and translated all over the world. The author, Gardner Hunting, has brought it up to date.

*Metropolis* may be refilmed by its original director, Fritz Lang!

Morris Scott Dollens is preparing a technicolor tour of the solar system called *Far Horizons*.

Our old-time favorites in the writing field are getting a break too. Under consideration at Universal I understand, are Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids*, and *The Legion of Space*. Lester del Rey's *Nerves* is being read around Hollywood. I'm told that Murray Leinster's *Murder of the U. S. A.* has been optioned. A picture titled *Invasion, U. S. A.* has been announced—whether this is a retitling of the Leinster novel or an entirely different picture I have not as yet been able to determine.

The British have sent us *Dr. Drake's Duck*, which you'll want to see if you enjoy a farce about a duck that lays "uranium" eggs. Also an invasion of the Earth film, *L. D. 100*. The invaders, for a pleasant change, turn out to be amicable.

Lippert will produce a *Miss 2000 A. D.* and a quickie called *3000 A. D.* has already been completed.

(Concluded on Page 162)



# In Your Mind's Eye



## The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

**I**F YOU just like to dream, read no further. There comes a time when your fancies *must* be brought into light—and stand the test of every-day, hard realities. Are you one of the thousands—perhaps millions—whose thoughts never get beyond the stage of *wistful wishing*? Do you often come to from a daydream with the sigh, "If only I could bring it about—*make it real!*"

All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worthwhile design of living.

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(CONCLUDED FROM PAGE 160)

Jack Vance's vegetable-menace short, *Hard Luck Diggings* has been bought for expansion into a film. 20th Century Fox has called in Ray Bradbury for consultation about plot development of the story.

*Woman Hater*, a comedy about the last bachelor in the world, will be a starring vehicle for George Brent.

*Ma and Pa Kettle Go To Heaven*—on a metcor! *The Left Hand of God*, a Tibetan fantasy novel, to be filmed in Mexico. *The Curse of the Cat* will be shot in Egypt for USA release. The list seems endless.

*Bright Tomorrow*, described by Weaver Wright as a kind of rich man's "Things To Come", is a futuristic script which has been prepared by Jacque Fresco with amazing models created by the Scientific Research Laboratories of Southern California. A documentary type history of the future which might interest the United Nations as backers.

*Atlantis* rides again in a remake scheduled from France of *Siren of Atlantis* (which starred the late Maria Montez), which was a remake of *Queen of Atlantis*, which was a remake of the silent French film, *L'Atlantide*.

INCIDENTALLY, when I was in Munich last June I met Brigitte Helm, star of Continental Scientifics such as *Metropolis*, *Gold*, *Mandragore Alraune*, etc. Also, at the time I was in Bavaria they were showing *One Million B. C.* under the title, *Tumak, the Prehistoric Chief*. And I saw there a remarkable German fantasy film, *The Eternal Game*, a reincarnation film involving witchcraft. In Frankfurt I saw *Metropolis*, *Spies*, *Faust*, *Siegfried*, *Kriemhild's Revenge* (last remaining print in existence), *A Trip to the North*

*Pole*, *A Glance Into the Past*, *The Story of the Boy Who Wanted To Learn How To Be Frightened*, and *Rocket Flight to the Moon*. Oh yes, also, *An Invisible Man Goes Through the City*.

In Paris I had the extreme pleasure to view (at the old Moulin Rouge, now converted into a cinema palace) *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen*, an outstanding color production. A most fantastic trip to the Moon is included with lunar inhabitants who (a la Burroughs and Otis Adelbert Kline) are born on trees like peapods and are later able to dissociate their heads from their bodies. Time on the Moon moves at a greatly accelerated pace—and so does the picture! I hope it will circulate in the U. S. one of these days.

*War of the Worlds* is under way at Paramount; the Martians, rather than being super slugs, will, I am told, be midgets. A friend of mine, Ray Harryhausen—the chap who animated *Mighty Joe Young*—on his own hook (prior to George Pal's purchase of *War of the Worlds*) had animated one of Wells' Martians in technicolor, and all may not be lost as another studio is interested in Harryhausen's animation for an original interplanetary yarn.

FLASH! Just as I was winding up the column I received a phone call and had read to me the story outline on a serious film of the year 2050 that has knocked my eardrums for a loop. If the right producer likes it you'll be seeing something sensational in a new science fiction film called, *The Creation!*

Which brings us up to date on coming scientific films. I'll be reporting in Madge regularly on all new developments from Hollywood . . . FJA

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